

## Bad Bosses--More Than Bad Salaries--Drive Workers Away

By Kathy Gurchiek

It's the stuff of cartoons, web sites and even [bad-boss dolls](#), but how a boss treats workers does affect the workplace environment and whether those employees will take on extra work, put in more hours and stay in the job, according to new university research.

"They say that employees don't leave their job or company, they leave their boss. We wanted to see if this is, in fact, true," Florida State University associate professor Wayne Hochwarter says in a press release.

In a survey conducted via mail in the fall of 2004 with 700 workers in a variety of jobs, Hochwarter, University of Alabama professor Chuck Kacmar, and FSU College of Business doctoral students Paul Harvey, and Jason Stoner found that:

- One-third, or 31 percent, said their supervisor gave them the "silent treatment" in the past year.
- 37 percent said their supervisor failed to give them credit when credit was due.
- 39 percent said their supervisor failed to keep his or her promises.
- 27 percent said their supervisor made negative comments about them to other employees or managers.
- 24 percent said their supervisor invaded their privacy.
- 23 percent said their supervisor blamed others to cover up his or her mistakes or to minimize embarrassment.

"That's a lot of different ways to say, 'My boss is an idiot,'" *Dilbert* cartoonist Scott Adams told *HR News* in an e-mail. "It's just unfortunate that the people who have the personalities you listed gravitate toward leadership positions," he said of the survey findings.

An abusive supervisor, rather than dissatisfaction with pay, was more likely to prompt employees to leave their job, according to the findings. Such workers are less likely to work longer or on weekends, or take on more tasks.

"Employees stuck in an abusive relationship experienced more exhaustion, job tension, nervousness, depressed mood and mistrust," Hochwarter said in a press release.

The survey findings are scheduled to be published in a 2007 issue of *The Leadership Quarterly*, a journal for scholars, consultants, practicing managers, executives, administrators and those who teach leadership. Most respondents worked in the southeastern United States and were asked to limit responses to the job they currently held.



The margin of error was not calculated, Hockwarter told *HR News*, because the article that will appear in the journal will “not focus on the prevalence of abusive behavior. Instead, abuse was used as a factor, in unison with moderators, to predict work outcomes.”

“This is not a one-way thing” in which “the employees are angels and these managers are ...abusive,” he said of the findings. “Some of it’s just bad manners. I don’t think people roll out of bed thinking ‘how can I abuse my [subordinates].’”

He heard from one supervisor who, after repeatedly giving a subordinate the same direction on a task that was needed, finally gave the person the ‘cold shoulder’ out of exasperation.

There are other issues that also come into play, he noted, including an entitlement mentality among some employees, a difference among generations in their expectations of the workplace, and layoffs that have created “de-layering,”

“I think there’s just a lot of conflict going on in organizations and I think the management issue is somewhat [due to] de-layering,” which happens when companies get rid of layers of employees and a manager suddenly has more subordinates to supervise.

“People are more anxious [at work] and when they’re anxious they’re less likely to act civilly,” he said.

The research looks at things from one perspective, he observed.

“A lot of it, I think, is a bigger issue of just society’s view on authority figures,” he said of the findings. “There’s this real interesting dynamic going on not only in organizations but...this bigger issue of who’s looking out for me.”

### **Ways to cut the impact**

And sometimes there are abusive supervisors. Hockwarter has heard from some employees who suffer under them. There are several ways to minimize the effects of an abusive supervisor, he said, including staying visible at work.

“It is common for the employee to blame himself or herself for the abuse, causing embarrassment. Hiding can be detrimental to your career, especially when it keeps others in the company from noticing your talent and contributions. In most cases, others know who the bullies are at work—they likely have a history of mistreating others,” he said in a press release.

There’s also the issue of people who are responsible for tasks promoted to being responsible for other people.

“The more training that managers, especially new managers, can get to tap into issues related to fairness and trust and balance, the more productive everyone’s going to be,” he said. “Most companies aren’t committed to management development, per se because it’s kind of hard to tie it to the numbers.”

“The supervisor is very, very important,” not only to the employee but also as an agent of the organization, he told *HR News*. Employees who think they’re not getting the right treatment from their supervisor associate that bad behavior with the organization as a whole.

Workplace bullying was the focus of a [study by Arizona State University](#) professor Sarah Tracy, the lead author; ASU professor Jess Alberts; and University of New Mexico assistant professor

Pamela Lutgen-Sandvik. Their findings were published in *Management Communication Quarterly* in 2006.

“People often can’t recognize the difference between a tough boss or a bully until they become the target,” Tracy said in a press release. “Co-workers, in fact, often blame the target for not speaking up.

“Our society sees victims as weak,” she said, “so the focus is usually on getting rid of the weak employee [more] than it is on getting rid of the bully. Bullies are often good at ‘managing up,’ so the organization doesn’t see the problem.”

Hochwarter encourages employees to remain positive, noting that “few subordinate-supervisor relationships last forever.”

He also urges employees to seek assistance.

“No abuse should be taken lightly, especially in situations where it becomes a criminal act,” such as physical violence, harassment or discrimination. “The employee needs to know where help can be found,” he pointed out, whether it’s an internal source of assistance, such as a grievance committee, or external, such as formal representation or emergency services.

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