1-2019

Does having a bad boss make you more likely to be one yourself?

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Citation

Bad Boss Make You More

Does having a bad boss make you more likely to be one yourself?

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Toxic bosses harm employees in countless ways — for instance, by lowering morale, diminishing well-being, and increasing work-family conflict. Estimates suggest abusive supervision costs organizations millions in lost productivity, employee turnover, and litigation each year. Although prior research has found that leader behaviors can "trickle down" to affect the actions of employees at lower organizational levels, surely not *all* abused supervisors abuse their own subordinates. So when do supervisors perpetuate abuse in organizations, when don't they, and why?

To begin answering these questions, we turned to existing research from the non-business world. Psychologist Albert Bandura, for example, developed social cognitive theory to explain how behavior — including abusive behavior — is learned from role models. For modeling to be successful, Bandura argued, an observer must pay attention to the modeled behavior, remember the behavior, and be motivated to reproduce it. In what is now considered a classic study, Bandura and his colleagues supported his theory by modeling aggressive or nonaggressive behavior to children from the Stanford University nursery. Kids who watched an adult (the model) throw, kick, and whack with a mallet an inflatable Bobo doll were significantly more likely to do the same (13 acts of aggression) than children who watched the adult play quietly with tinker toys (one act of aggression).

Despite what the theory suggests, however, other studies show that many individuals do not model observed behavior. Developmental psychology research, for example, reveals that adult children of abusive parents can respond in ways that suggest another process — disidentification — motivates their own parenting style. These parents report wanting to do right by their own kids and resolving not to repeat the pattern of abuse.

These conflicting bodies of research suggest that the processes that interrupt cycles of abuse are not well understood. So we turned to research on identity and identification to understand when and why abused supervisors in particular might change course by being less abusive and more ethical leaders.

We tested our idea across several studies. In one experiment, we asked 288 online participants to play the role of a supervisor at a café. They were told the café had a program that awarded employee suggestions and that they had given their manager an idea to improve the café's efficiency. For some participants, the manager became angry and belittled their idea in front of other supervisors. For others, the manager simply passed their idea along to upper management. We also manipulated the extent to which participants disidentified with their manager — for example, whether they were proud to be nothing like their manager, and whether they psychologically distanced themselves from their manager or not.

We then gave participants an opportunity to display their leadership style: In the scenario, one of *their*subordinates sent them an email with a suggestion to improve the café. The employee had created an advertisement to be used in a Facebook campaign, but it was littered with typos and grammatical mistakes. Would the participant — acting as supervisor — appreciate the employee's good intentions or lambaste the poor execution? After coding

participants' responses, we found that when they disidentified with their manager, those who experienced abuse demonstrated more ethical leadership behaviors than those who weren't mistreated. In other words, being abused by a fictional manager and seeing yourself as different from him or her made participants *more* ethical than participants who weren't mistreated by a manager at all.

To determine whether our findings applied to real work settings, we also surveyed 500 employees and their leaders working in various organizations and industries in India. We found that, overall, abusive behavior from the manager resulted in a 12% increase in a supervisor's disidentification from that person. But the strongest tendencies to disidentify occurred among those supervisors who relied on their morals and integrity — what researchers refer to as having a strong moral identity. Among these people, abusive manager behavior resulted in a 14% increase in disidentification, slightly higher than the total group. Importantly, when supervisors were able to disidentify, this psychological distancing led to an 8% increase in ethical behaviors and a 6% decrease in abusive behaviors toward the supervisors' team members.

In contrast, when supervisors relied less on their moral identity, abuse from their managers did not result in any significant disidentification. These results support the idea that abused supervisors engage in more ethical and less abusive behavior with their own subordinates because they disidentify with their abusive managers, and that this is more likely to occur when supervisors possess a strong moral identity.

So what should employees and leaders take away from our research? Though we certainly don't recommend abusive treatment as a way to inspire ethical behavior, our study highlights one silver lining to come from the dark cloud cast by abusive supervision. That is, individuals might be able to inoculate themselves from the abuses of their supervisor through disidentification, which can lead to more ethical and less abusive behavior. This suggests the cycle of abuse isn't inevitable in organizations, just as developmental psychology research shows that abusive parenting does not always lead the next generation of parents to become offenders.

But if efforts to short-circuit the modeling of bad behaviors are to be successful, organizations should select supervisors who have strong moral identities, or work to strengthen the moral identities of current managers. An 18-month long ethnographic study of a leadership development program suggests one way organizations might do this is by "undoing" the identities of supervisors who perpetuate abuse. Other work suggests organizations can increase ethical behavior by reminding people of organizational or professional standards — for example, by displaying codes of ethics or conduct throughout the office.

Regardless of what organizations might do to curb abusive behavior, leaders who experience abuse from their manager should know this: You are not your boss, and his or her leadership style doesn't have to define yours. If nothing else, you can view your experience as an opportunity to learn how *not*to lead a team. With that attitude, having a bad boss could make you a great one.

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