

Who's afraid of the big bad boss? Plenty of us, study shows

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The abusive boss has been well documented in movies ("Nine to Five"), television (Fox's "My Big Fat Obnoxious Boss") and even the Internet (HateBoss.com). Now, a Florida State University professor and two of his doctoral students have conducted a study that shines some light on the magnitude of the problem and documents its effects on employee health and job performance.

"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," said Wayne Hochwarter, an associate professor of management in FSU's College of Business.

Working with doctoral students Paul Harvey and Jason Stoner, Hochwarter surveyed more than 700 people who work in a variety of jobs about their opinions of supervisor treatment on the job. The survey generated the following results:

- * Thirty-one percent of respondents reported that their supervisor gave them the "silent treatment" in the past year.
- * Thirty-seven percent reported that their supervisor failed to give credit when due.
- * Thirty-nine percent noted that their supervisor failed to keep promises.
- * Twenty-seven percent noted that their supervisor made negative comments about them to other employees or managers.
- * Twenty-four percent reported that their supervisor invaded their privacy.

* Twenty-three percent indicated that their supervisor blames others to cover up mistakes or to minimize embarrassment.

According to the researchers, "Employees stuck in an abusive relationship experienced more exhaustion, job tension, nervousness, depressed mood and mistrust.

They also were less likely to take on additional tasks, such as working longer or on weekends, and were generally less satisfied with their job. Also, employees were more likely to leave if involved in an abusive relationship than if dissatisfied with pay."

Apparently, employees are willing to leave their supervisor after all. Hochwarter suggests several ways that employees can minimize the harm caused by an abusive supervisor.

"The first is to stay visible at work," he said. "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."

Hochwarter also recommended keeping an optimistic outlook.

"It is important to stay positive, even when you get irritated or discouraged, because few subordinate-supervisor relationships last forever," he said. "You want the next boss to know what you can do for the company."

Finally, he said, "No abuse should be taken lightly, especially in situations where it becomes a criminal act (for example, physical

violence, harassment or discrimination). The employee needs to know where help can be found, whether it is internal (i.e., the company's grievance committee) or external (i.e., formal representation or emergency services)."

The results of the study have been scheduled for publication in an upcoming issue of *The Leadership Quarterly*, a journal read by scholars, consultants, practicing managers, executives and administrators, as well as those who teach leadership.

Source: FSU

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