

Targets of bully bosses aren't the only victims, new research shows

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Abusive bosses who target employees with ridicule, public criticism, and the silent treatment not only have a detrimental effect on the employees they bully, but they negatively impact the work environment for the co-workers of those employees who suffer from "second-hand" or vicarious abusive supervision, according to new research from the University of New Hampshire.

In the first ever study to investigate vicarious supervisory abuse, Paul Harvey, associate professor of [organizational behavior](#) at UNH, and his research colleagues Kenneth Harris and Raina Harris from Indiana University Southeast and Melissa Cast from New Mexico State University find that vicarious supervisory abuse is associated with job frustration, abuse of other coworkers, and a lack of perceived organizational support beyond the effects of the abusive supervisor.

The research is presented in the *Journal of [Social Psychology](#)* in the article "An Investigation of Abusive Supervision, Vicarious Abuse Supervision, and Their Joint Impacts."

Abusive supervision is considered a dysfunctional type of leadership and includes a sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors toward subordinates.

"Although the effects of abusive supervision may not be as physically harmful as other types of dysfunctional behavior, such as [workplace violence](#) or aggression, the actions are likely to leave longer-lasting

wounds, in part, because abusive supervision can continue for a long time," Harvey said.

Those long-lasting wounds also are felt by the co-workers of the victims of bullying bosses.

Vicarious supervisory abuse is defined as the observation or awareness of a supervisor abusing a co-worker. Examples of vicarious supervisory abuse in a workplace include an employee hearing rumors of abusive behavior from coworkers, reading about such behaviors in an email, or actually witnessing the abuse of a coworker.

"When vicarious abusive supervision is present, employees realize that the organization is allowing this negative treatment to exist, even if they are not experiencing it directly," the researchers said.

The researchers queried a sample of 233 people who work in a wide range of occupations in the Southeast United States. Demographically, the sample was 46 percent men, 86 percent white, had an average age of 42.6 years, had worked in their job for seven years, had worked at their company for 10 years, and worked an average of 46 hours a week. Survey respondents were asked about supervisory abuse, vicarious supervisory abuse, job frustration, perceived organizational support, and coworker abuse.

The researchers found similar negative impacts of first-hand supervisory abuse and second-hand vicarious supervisory abuse: greater job frustration, tendency to abuse other [coworkers](#), and a lack of perceived organizational support. In addition, the negative effects from either type of abuse were intensified if the coworker was a victim of both kinds of supervisory abuse.

"Our research suggests that vicarious abusive supervision is as likely as

abusive supervision to negatively affect desired outcomes, with the worst outcomes resulting when both vicarious abusive supervision and abusive supervision are present," the researchers said. "Top management needs further education regarding the potential impacts of vicarious abuse supervision on employees to prevent and/or mitigate the effects of such abuse."

Provided by University of New Hampshire

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