

Research on guilt-prone individuals has implications for workplace

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Some people hate to disappoint—and you should definitely get them on your team. It turns out individuals who are highly prone to feel guilty for disappointing their co-workers are among the most ethical and hard-working partners. However, new research suggests that these highly guilt-prone people may be the most reticent to enter into partnerships.

Scott S. Wiltermuth, assistant professor of management and organization at the USC Marshall School of Business, along with Taya R. Cohen at Carnegie Mellon University, explains how [guilt](#) proneness may prevent people from forming partnerships in "I'd Only Let You Down': Guilt Proneness and the Avoidance of Harmful Interdependence," which is published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Understanding this phenomenon, managers can make the best decisions about team building and increase productivity.

The Guilty are Good Workers

Highly guilt-prone people (i.e., people with a strong dispositional tendency to feel guilty for wrongdoings) make valuable work partners because a concern about letting others down drives them to complete at least their fair share of the work.

"Because of this concern for the impact of their actions on others' welfare, highly guilt-prone people often outwork their less guilt-prone colleagues, demonstrate more effective leadership and contribute more

to the success of the teams and partnerships in which they are involved," Wiltermuth explained.

However, these same behavioral tendencies may, in some instances, also lead these individuals to be reticent to enter into certain partnerships at work.

In five studies, Wiltermuth and Cohen demonstrated that highly guilt-prone people may avoid forming interdependent partnerships with people they perceive to be more competent than themselves, because benefitting a partner less than the partner benefits them could trigger feelings of guilt.

"It may come as a surprise," Wiltermuth said, "but our findings demonstrate that people who lack competence may not always seek out competence in others when choosing work partners."

In studies where Wiltermuth asked participants with whom they would like to partner to complete a task, given information about their potential partners' expertise in that area, highly guilt-prone people with less knowledge or skill in that area were less likely to choose the most competent partner. They were afraid to contribute less to the task than their partner and, thus, let them down.

But They Won't Ask for a Bonus

In the studies, highly guilt-prone people were also more likely than others to opt to be paid on their performance alone and to opt to be paid based on the average of their performance and that of others whose competence was more similar to their own.

"Guilt proneness reduces the incidence of unethical behavior," Wiltermuth said. "Highly guilt-prone people are conscientious. They are

less likely to free-ride on others' expertise, and they will sacrifice financial gain out of concern about how their actions would influence others' welfare."

Those in supervisory roles can use this research to create the most effective dynamics in the workplace and increase productivity.

"Managers could try to ensure that highly guilt-prone people are creating the partnerships and perhaps even assuming leadership roles on teams," Wiltermuth said, "despite highly guilt-prone people's fear that by accepting these leadership positions they might be putting themselves into position to let their teammates down."

Provided by USC Marshall School of Business

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