Medical Xpress

Keep to yourself! Don't offer co-workers help unless asked

October 22 2018, by Caroline Brooks

New workplace research from Michigan State University found that when it comes to offering your assistance at work, it's best to mind your business. Credit: Michigan State University via PxHere

If you thought that proactively offering help to your co-workers was a good thing, think again. New workplace research from Michigan State University found that when it comes to offering your expertise, it's better

to keep to yourself or wait until you're asked.

Building upon previous findings that showed how helping colleagues slows one's success, management professor Russell Johnson looked more closely at the different kinds of help in which people engage at work—and how that help was received. The research findings, published in *Journal of Applied Psychology*, quantified the term, "it's best to stay in your own swim lane."

"Right now, there's a lot of stress on productivity in the workplace, and to be a real go-getter and help everyone around you," Johnson said. "But, it's not necessarily the best thing when you go out looking for problems and spending time trying to fix them."

In looking at the ways people help one another in the workplace, Johnson explained that there are two basic kinds of help one can offer—proactive and reactive help—which are differentiated by whether or not assistance was requested.

If you are the go-getter and actively offering to help others, you're proactively helping. If a co-worker approaches you and asks for assistance that you then give, you're reactively helping, Johnson explained.

"What we found was that on the helper side, when people engage in proactive help, they often don't have a clear understanding of recipients' problems and issues, thus they receive less gratitude for it," Johnson said. "On the recipient side, if people are constantly coming up to me at work and asking if I want their help, it could have an impact on my esteem and become frustrating. I'm not going to feel inclined to thank the person who tried to help me because I didn't ask for it."

Johnson surveyed 54 employees between the ages of 21 and 60 who

worked full-time jobs across a variety of industries, including manufacturing, government, health care and education. He collected data over 10 days for a collective 232 daily observations to assess daily helping, receipt of gratitude, perceived positive social impact and work engagement.

With less gratitude for the helper and lower esteem for the person receiving help, Johnson explained that the respondents' answers proved that proactive help has negative bearings on both sides—but for different reasons.

"Being proactive can have toxic effects, especially on the helper. They walk away receiving less gratitude from the person that they're helping, causing them to feel less motivated at work the next day. More often than not, help recipients won't express gratitude immediately, which makes it meaningless as it relates to the helper's actual act," Johnson said. "As for the person receiving the unrequested help, they begin to question their own competency and feel a threat to their workplace autonomy."

In some ways, Johnson said that his research suggests workers mind their own business and not go looking for problems to solve. Ultimately, he said, help is good—but just wait to be asked for it.

"As someone who wants to help, just sit back and do your own work. That's when you'll get the most bang for your buck," he said. "As the person receiving help, you should at a minimum express gratitude—and the sooner the better. If you wait a few days, it won't have a positive impact on the helper.".

Johnson's next research will examine the ramifications of receiving help from recipients' point of view, and how their reactions and feelings can shape the social climate at work.

Medical Xpress

Provided by Michigan State University

Citation: Keep to yourself! Don't offer co-workers help unless asked (2018, October 22) retrieved 26 April 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-10-dont-co-workers.html

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.