

Managers Repay Loyal Workers With Unpaid Labor

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Managers target loyal workers over less committed colleagues when doling out unpaid work and additional job tasks, research finds.

“Companies want loyal workers, and there is a ton of research showing that loyal workers provide all sorts of positive benefits to companies,” says Matthew Stanley, the lead researcher on the new paper and postdoctoral researcher at Duke University’s Fuqua School of Business. “But it seems like managers are apt to target them for exploitative practices.”

That’s the main conclusion from a series of experiments conducted by Stanley and his colleagues Chris Neck and Chris Neck, father-and-son researchers at Arizona State University and West Virginia University, respectively.

The findings appear in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

For the study, Stanley recruited nearly 1,400 managers online to read about a fictional 29-year-old employee named John. The managers all learned that John’s company was on a tight budget, and to keep costs down, had to decide how willing they would be to task John with extra hours and responsibilities without any extra pay. (Participants handing out the unpaid work in Stanley’s study were compensated \$12 an hour.)

No matter how Stanley and his colleagues framed the scenario, branding John as loyal always resulted in managers being more willing to ask him to shoulder the unpaid labor.

Managers were more willing to exploit Loyal John over Disloyal John. And when a separate group of managers read a letter of recommendation about John, the letters praising John as loyal led to an increased willingness to recruit him for unpaid work over versions of John extolled for honesty or fairness.

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The reverse was true, too: when John was portrayed as having a reputation to accept extra hours and workload, managers rated him as more loyal than a John who had a reputation to decline the same workload. Agreeable John and Refusal John were rated as similarly honest and fair however, demonstrating that loyalty but not closely related moral traits is bolstered by a history of doing free labor.

“It’s a vicious cycle,” Stanley says. “Loyal workers tend to get picked out for exploitation. And then when they do something that’s exploitative, they end up getting a boost in their reputation as a loyal worker, making them more likely to get picked out in the future.”

One reason managers preyed on loyal workers over others is their belief that it’s just the price to pay for being loyal. Stanley and his team found that managers targeted loyal workers because they believe that loyalty comes with a duty to make personal sacrifices for their company.

It’s not all malicious, though. Exploitation may be in part just due to ignorance, or what psychologists call “ethical blindness.”

“Most people want to be good,” Stanley says. “Yet, they transgress with surprising frequency in their everyday lives. A lot of it is due to ethical blindness, where people don’t see how what they’re doing is inconsistent with whatever principles or values they tend to profess.”

The study doesn’t provide a quick fix to eradicate employers’ exploitative practices, but one partial cure might be simply having managers recognize the error of their ways and point out these ethical blind spots, Stanley says.

While company loyalty seems to come with consequence, Stanley cautions that it doesn’t mean we should just abandon work commitments or dodge uncompensated overtime. This is just an unfortunate side effect of a mostly positive trait, which Stanley recently found also happens with other aspirational traits, like generosity.

“I don’t want to suggest that the take-away of the paper is to not be loyal to anybody because it just leads to disaster,” Stanley says. “We value people who are loyal. We think about them in positive terms. They get awarded often. It’s not just the negative side. It’s really tricky and complex.”

Source: Dan Vahaba for Duke University.

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