

March 31st, 2021

Press Release

Study

Paradox: Being spared abuse motivates employees to quit

Toxic leadership harms companies. But what are the consequences of inconsistent toxic leadership, i.e. when superiors treat some employees badly but spare others? Research conducted by Dr. Benjamin Korman at Kühne Logistics University (KLU) as part of his doctoral thesis shows for the first time that being favored by one's manager can motivate employees to leave their organization. What leads to this behavior, which seems paradoxical at first glance? How can companies and employees react?

"My research shows that when employees are treated differently by their manager compared to their colleagues, it leads to a fear of social exclusion and employees feel ashamed," explains Dr. Benjamin Korman. Shame occurs equally among favored and disadvantaged employees. "Employees who are *mistreated by their boss feel shame, our theory goes, because they assume that they are the 'weakest link' on the team,*" Korman says. He continues, "employees who are spared mistreatment, on the other hand, feel shame because their coworkers may consider them allied with the abusive supervisor."

Consequences of toxic leadership

"A boss who treats a specific employee comparatively well, but abuses others, may thus motivate the employee to leave the company," Korman says. To test his theory, he conducted two online experiments together with Prof. Christian Tröster (KLU) and Prof. Steffen R. Giessner (Erasmus University), with 195 and 231 participants respectively.

The result: The consequences of toxic leadership can actually be more negative for the company overall when the leader behaves inconsistently than when leaders treat all employees equally badly. "The research suggests that in teams where all members are affected by toxic leadership, fewer employees will be motivated to leave the organization than in teams where some are treated better, others worse," Korman says. The reason: If everyone shares the same fate, team members don't feel socially excluded by their coworkers or ashamed, which in turn reduces their motivation to leave the organization.

Protecting employees

Thus, "It's important for companies to look closely at what is happening within their teams because low turnover does not necessarily indicate good leadership," Korman points out. The number of employees who leave a team or company is, therefore, not a suitable indicator of whether the leader is treating subordinates well or not.

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On the other hand, annual surveys of employees regarding their satisfaction with their work environment and working conditions, for example, would provide a better overview, he says. "Of course, any methods of toxic leadership - whether affecting all or only specific employees - must be absolutely rejected," Korman continues, "That must be clear, or made clear, to all managers in the company." Furthermore, employees affected by toxic leadership behavior should raise the issue with their HR department or should talk directly with their supervisor, as these are often not aware of how their behavior is affecting their employees.

Publication: Korman, B., Tröster, C., & Giessner, S. (2021). The Consequences of Incongruent Abusive Supervision: Anticipation of Social Exclusion, Shame, and Turnover Intentions. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*. doi: 10.1177/15480518211005463

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About KLU

Kühne Logistics University – Wissenschaftliche Hochschule für Logistik und Unternehmensführung (KLU) – is a private university located in Hamburg's Hafencity. The independent, state-certified university's major research areas are Sustainability, Digital Transformation and Value Creation in the fields of Transport, Global Logistics, and Supply Chain Management.

KLU is one of very few private universities in Germany entitled to confer their own PhDs. The 2021 ranking of the Wirtschaftswoche identifies KLU as one of the strongest research universities in the field of Business Administration in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Comparing the research output per professor among all participating universities, KLU ranked 4th in Germany and 8th in the DACH region. In the latest CHE university ranking, KLU obtained the highest marks for all major criteria.

With one BSc and three MSc degree programs, a structured doctoral program, and a part-time Executive MBA, KLU offers its 400 full-time students a high level of specialization and excellent learning conditions. KLU has an international team of 23 professors who teach in English. In open, tailor-made management seminar series, industry specialists and managers alike benefit from the application of academic findings to practical issues.

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