

Leadership Qualities

Leaders Can't Make Up for Bad Behavior by Being Nice Later

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Summary. Although both prevailing wisdom and existing research have often supported the idea that managers can “make up” for abusive behavior by subsequently acting ethically, a recent study reveals a much different story. When leaders oscillate between abusive... [more](#)

As Pat quickly walked back to his office, the echo of his own angry words was still ringing loudly in his ears. Just a few minutes earlier, Pat had publicly berated a product lead after a botched test, calling them “incompetent” and a “disgrace” in front of the entire team. Even worse, this wasn’t the first time Pat had lost his temper in such spectacular fashion. His pattern of explosive outbursts, followed by periods of remorse and contrition, had become all too familiar for his colleagues, who often wondered aloud which version of Pat — “Good Pat (Dr. Jekyll)” or “Bad Pat (Mr. Hyde)” — would show up today.

As Pat slumped into his chair, the guilt began to creep in. “I’ll make it up to them,” he muttered to himself, convincing himself that by acting especially kind and fair over the next few days, he could erase the damage of his outburst. But little did Pat realize he was playing a dangerous game, with the stakes much higher than he realized for his team’s performance.

Although both prevailing wisdom and existing research have often supported the idea that managers can “make up” for abusive behavior by subsequently acting ethically, our recent study reveals a much different story. When leaders oscillate between abusive and ethical behaviors, it has a more detrimental impact on employees’ performance than abuse alone. This “Jekyll and Hyde” leadership style leads to greater uncertainty and emotional exhaustion among employees, damaging their ability to perform their duties effectively, reducing their willingness to engage in important organizational citizenship behaviors (e.g., helping a colleague), and increasing the likelihood that they will engage in counterproductive work behavior (e.g., stealing office supplies).

What the Research Shows About “Jekyll and Hyde” Leaders

To explore the impact of leaders who alternate between abusive and ethical leadership over time (i.e., practicing both abusive and ethical leadership styles), we recently conducted three studies involving more than 650 full-time employees in the U.S. and the UK using both survey and experimental data. Our findings are published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*. In this research, abusive behaviors — characterized by a leader’s hostile verbal and nonverbal actions — represent leader injustice. Conversely, ethical leadership exemplifies leader justice through fair treatment and reinforcement of appropriate conduct. Although these behaviors seem unlikely to coexist in the same leader, evidence shows that leaders can alternate between these fair and unfair behaviors in their interactions with employees across different times and situations. For instance, a leader may respond abusively to an employee’s project mistakes but show care toward that employee the next day. While this may seem manageable in the short term, repeated swings between these behaviors can have significant consequences — a focus of our research.

Abuse is certainly bad by itself, but employees can at least anticipate the actions of a more consistently abusive leader and either attempt to avoid them or interact with them in ways that protect themselves and their well-being. However, leaders who alternate between abusive and ethical behaviors increase their employees' uncertainty about their leaders' future behavior, resulting in employees' emotional exhaustion and decline in job performance.

Additionally, these detrimental effects on employees' performance are evident even when employees are not the direct recipients of such inconsistent leadership. When employees hear about their immediate supervisors being subjected to cycles of both abuse and ethical leadership by higher-level managers, they begin to doubt their supervisors' ability to serve as an effective link between the team and higher-level managers. Thus, employees begin to have concerns about their supervisor's ability to represent the team to and influence higher-level managers (e.g., secure valued resources), thereby reducing their motivation to perform and contribute to the team. Our research shows that when a higher-level manager alternates between ethical leadership and abusive behavior toward the supervisor who reports directly to them, it creates more uncertainty in the supervisor's followers about the supervisor's abilities than if the supervisor were only abused by the higher-level manager.

Reducing the Prevalence of Abusive Behavior

The key message is clear: Ethical leadership cannot shield employees from the negative impacts of manager or supervisor abuse. If anything, it may only make things worse. Given these findings, what might leaders, organizations, and employees consider doing to reduce the prevalence of abusive leader behavior?

We suggest leaders like Pat must either consistently eliminate all future instances of abusive behavior or reconsider the benefits of trying to "restore" their image after cyclic acts of abuse. Leaders should recognize that attempts to "make up" for past negative behavior by "doing good" — unless they eliminate future acts of

abuse completely — can backfire, exacerbating the situation rather than ameliorating it. For leaders, consistency in positive and fair leadership behaviors is the only way to go. As unfair leadership behaviors often stem from poor emotional regulation, techniques such as mindfulness, stress management, and cognitive-behavioral strategies can help leaders better manage their emotional responses and thus prevent abusive supervision from happening, particularly in high-pressure situations.

For organizations, it is essential to use all available HR tools — such as training, selection, rewards, and disciplinary actions — to address and reduce instances of Jekyll and Hyde leadership. Leaders across hierarchical levels should receive training on effective self-regulation to prevent abusive behavior that might follow their ethical actions, or the other way around. Additionally, selecting individuals with high self-control and emotional stability can help ensure consistent, fair leadership. Organizations should also create channels for employees to report abusive behavior and have clear protocols for holding leaders accountable. Organizations must adopt zero-tolerance policies for abusive behavior, with strong protocols for handling such instances to ensure their employees' safety and well-being.

Finally, although the lion's share of responsibility for preventing Jekyll and Hyde leadership falls on leaders and organizations, employees also have an important role to play. Some leaders may believe that "good makes up for bad," leading to repeated instances of Jekyll and Hyde behavior. In such instances, it is crucial for employees to address their concerns and discomfort with the leader through open and honest communication. While some research suggests that by directly communicating their discomfort with the leader, employees will alleviate their distress, there is also reason to believe that leaders will retaliate, thus exacerbating the problem. If the leader retaliates and/or does not adjust their behavior after these conversations, employees should escalate the issue to HR or senior leadership, potentially requesting a leadership change. If such measures prove ineffective, it may be necessary for employees to consider leaving the organization for their own well-being and future success.

Ultimately, leadership is not a balancing act between right and wrong — it's about building trust through unwavering consistency. When leaders try to offset abusive actions with ethical ones, they risk deepening distrust and damaging their teams and organizations in ways that can have long-lasting, far-reaching impact. To be effective managers, leaders must therefore commit to being consistently ethical, fair, and just, knowing that only those who embody this steadiness of behavior will truly be successful as leaders, and build a team of high-performing followers, in the long run.

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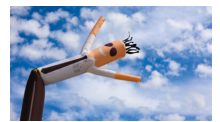
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