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# Employees Friendly with Bosses Are More Likely to Model Unethical Behavior

April 05, 2018



New research by Utah State University Huntsman School of Business Professor Julena Bonner finds that when employees have a good relationship with their supervisor, they are more likely to model the supervisors' morally questionable behaviors.

Bonner's research was recently published in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior* in an article, "[Supervisor expediency to employee expediency: The moderating role of leader-member exchange and the mediating role of employee unethical tolerance](#)," with co-authors Rebecca L. Greenbaum of Oklahoma State University, Mary Bardes Mawritz of Drexel University, Brian Webster of Ball State University, and Joe Kim of Temple University.

Across three studies, the researchers assessed employees and their supervisors in multiple industries. Research participants were evaluated to determine whether the employee or their supervisor were engaging in "expediency behaviors," meaning questionable behaviors a worker may carry out in order to accomplish their tasks more efficiently, such as cutting corners to try to get things done more quickly or altering numbers to appear more successful. In addition to modeling the morally questionable practices of a supervisor with whom they have a good relationship, the study also found that employees are likely to experience a degree of ethical fading no matter their relationship with their boss as a result of observing their supervisors' expedient behaviors.

"From past research and anecdotal evidence, we understand that serious unethical behaviors in the workplace begin with small questionable behaviors," said Bonner. "We found that when subordinates witness supervisors carrying out this type of behavior, their level of tolerance and likelihood of adopting these questionable business practices are amplified by having a friendly relationship with their boss. When left uncorrected, this can result in a normalization of seemingly minor unethical infractions across a company culture."

Bonner continued, "The WorldCom fraud scandal, for example, began with hiding small losses, but eventually ended with the company concealing over \$12 billion in losses. Our findings suggest that organizations should offer ethical training to employees to teach them to not blindly follow their supervisors' example, even in practices that may seem relatively harmless and commonplace but are immoral."

#### About Utah State University's Jon M. Huntsman School of Business

The mission of the Jon M. Huntsman School of Business at Utah State University is to develop leaders of distinction in commerce and public affairs. The School, with nationally ranked curricular programs and award winning faculty and students, is located in beautiful Logan, Utah, regularly recognized as among the best places to live in the United States. Visit [huntsman.usu.edu](https://huntsman.usu.edu) and follow USU Huntsman on Twitter: @huntsmanschool.

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