

The Best Way to Boost Workers' Mental Health Is to Give Them Good Managers

To improve workers' health, research shows, companies need to support “transformational” leaders and weed out “destructive” actors, not just tout wellness programs

From Scientific American
By Daisy Grewal, February 13, 2023

Workers are not doing well. Around the globe, employees report rising rates of burnout despite efforts by many organizations to add programs and resources such as counseling, more paid time off and even free access to meditation apps.

The ongoing distress may be because none of these steps directly address one of the biggest impacts on your well-being: your manager. Now a study pinpoints the specific leadership styles that make the largest difference. It also revealed that increasing positive management tactics may be every bit as important as minimizing bad leadership.

This research, published in the *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, outlines findings from an analysis of 53 studies that tested how leadership style affects employee mental health. By analyzing results across studies, this meta-analysis provides much stronger evidence than any single investigation on its own. Previous research had established the link between leadership style and mental health, but this new effort goes further: it is the first to explain *which* styles make the biggest difference. The researchers looked at both the positive impact of helpful styles and the negative effects of unhelpful ones.

The scientists compared seven distinct leadership styles. Among the most common is transactional, in which bosses focus on consistently rewarding and punishing people based on performance. Another frequent style is laissez-faire, where managers largely leave employees to their own devices. Of the seven styles, the analysis found that two had the most significant effects on employee well-being: transformational and destructive.

Managers who adopted a transformational leadership style had the biggest positive impact on their employees' mental health. First defined in the early 1970s, transformational leaders inspire others by painting a vision, encouraging team members to engage in creative thinking and tailoring their approach to the individual needs of each employee. This style had far and away the most positive results, as measured by employee reports of their own well-being. It even beat out the leader-member exchange approach, in which the manager and employee have a tight-knit relationship, and the relationship- and task-oriented leadership styles, which emphasize supportiveness and efficiency respectively.

On the flip side, the researchers also found that destructive leadership styles, where bosses engage in aggressive and hostile behavior, have the largest negative impact on employee mental health. While anyone who has worked for a difficult manager won't find that surprising, the analysis still held a twist. In many psychological studies, scientists have found that "bad is stronger than good" in most people's mind. People generally expect that a truly awful boss is far more detrimental than an inspirational leader can be beneficial. The researchers therefore anticipated that the negative effects of a bad leader would be substantially greater than the positive effects of a good one. Instead they found that transformational leadership was just as powerful in explaining positive mental health outcomes as destructive leadership was in explaining negative outcomes.

This has powerful implications. It means that making average leaders better (specifically by helping them be more transformational) can have just as much of a positive impact as minimizing destructive leadership. To be clear, companies should work to eliminate toxic behaviors in their managers. But the findings suggest that increasing the number of transformational leaders should *also* be a high priority for companies. Doing that could be just as effective as pouring money into programs such as stress-reduction and mindfulness resources. Given that employees often use those tools to cope with their average or destructive managers, improving leadership through training, for instance, could be a more powerful intervention.

Helping managers identify specific actions and attitudes they should either adopt or avoid will improve the mental health of employees. Better management will lead to a healthier organizational culture overall, one that reinforces what excellent leadership looks like and what types of behaviors are not tolerated. And that change can kick off a virtuous cycle: over time, a healthy culture attracts better employees and better leaders.