



The Poor Performance of a Worker Can Impact the Whole Workplace

What is this research about?

Research has shown that workers will come up with reasons to explain why something bad happens in a workplace. These reasons, in turn, have an impact on how workers interact with one another. So when deadlines or sales targets are not met, workers will come up with reasons – or ‘counterfactuals,’ which are thoughts about what could have happened – to make sense of these negative events. Workers’ reasons and counterfactuals can have an impact on how workers engage with one another. They can cause employee turnover, absenteeism, lost productivity, low morale, and even violence. How do co-workers assess and interact with those who perform poorly?

What did the researcher do?

Professor Ward Struthers at York University looked at how the reasons which workers come up with to explain poor work performance can shape and influence the judgments of their co-workers. He also looked at the role of both responsibility assumptions and interpersonal emotions on the interactions of co-workers. Finally, he considered the extent to which the misinterpretation of an employee’s poor

What you need to know:

The reasons which workers come up with to explain the poor performance of a colleague can have a strong impact on how these workers interact with that colleague.

performance, by co-workers, moderates their judgments. In a second set of studies, Professor Struthers explored how counterfactual thinking may help to lessen harsh co-worker judgments and interactions.

What did the researcher find?

Professor Struthers found that the reasons which people come up with to explain a worker’s poor performance are central in determining if they will judge the worker in a favourable or harsh light. Likewise, these reasons determine whether co-workers will cooperate and forgive the worker, or seek revenge and make a report to a supervisor. He also found that workers were judged more harshly by co-workers when the cause of the poor performance was perceived to be controllable. For example, when the cause of the poor performance of a worker seemed to

be to a worker's lack of ability or effort, his or her co-workers were likely to seek revenge and not sympathize with their colleague. If it seemed like a worker lacked ability but was making an effort, co-workers were likely to avoid the situation. Workers who had a lot of ability but put forth little effort were likely to be punished and not helped by their colleagues. Workers who had a lot of ability and also tried hard received sympathy from others in the workplace – but were likely to be punished, too. This suggests that other factors – beyond those that can be attributed to a worker – may play a role in the reaction of his or her co-workers.

How can you use this research?

This study will be useful to anyone involved in managing the well-being of employees. Many businesses today empower close-knit work teams. As a result, strong employee performance is essential to the success of a firm. More research, however, is needed on how the poor performance of an individual in the workplace impacts other workers.

About the Researcher

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