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People Who Punish or Reward Tend to Moralize Even Conventional Behavior

What is this research about?

According to research, when a person in a position of power has to reward or punish a subordinate, he or she may base the decision on one of three things:

1. Personal opinions or preferences
2. Rules or conventions
3. Moral absolutes

For example, a supervisor, who punishes an employee for wearing strong cologne in the office, can rationalize the punishment in one of three ways: the supervisor finds the cologne personally offensive; the office to which they both belong has a rule that bans the use of strong cologne; or wearing strong cologne in a shared social space is simply just wrong and anyone should know that. However, a supervisor who bases a punishment or a reward on a personal opinion or a social convention takes on some responsibility for any harm or benefit that he or she causes to the subordinate. A moral absolute, on the other hand, is a fundamental truth that, in theory, is incontrovertible and inherent to all cultures. Punishing someone, based on a moral absolute, may relieve the punisher of personal

What you need to know:

Managers who have to reward or punish others may be prone to moralizing. This can create problems because it may make the manager less tolerant of errant behavior while others in the social group, who may be wary of moralizing attitudes, may react against the manager.

responsibility because the moral absolute dictates what is appropriate.

Researchers at York University's Schulich School of Business set out to determine the reasons on which people based their decisions to reward or punish someone else – and how the exercise of different kinds of power relates to moralization.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers presented commuters – of all ages, sexes, and backgrounds – with different scenarios in which they had to reward or punish a subordinate. They looked at the commuters' reasoning behind their decisions to reward or punish the subordinate.

What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that when people are faced with having to punish someone, they tend to place responsibility for that decision on a moral absolute. In other words, people moralize their decisions to punish. They do so to protect their positive views of themselves. Even when faced with having to punish someone for trivial behaviour – like talking too loud in an office – people tend to moralize. By thinking of ‘loud talking’ as fundamentally bad behaviour that anyone in any culture would reject, people may be trying to cope with the stress of having to punish others.

How can you use this research?

People in positions of power – such as managers and supervisors – need to be aware of how they are rationalizing their decisions to influence subordinates. In particular, the influence methods that we use can influence the way we see other people’s behavior and responses.

About the Researchers

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