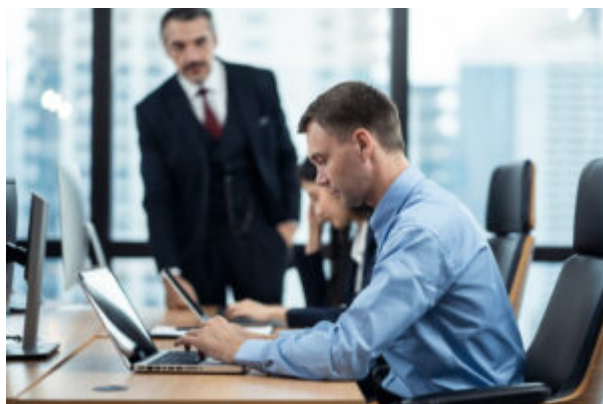


New Study Finds Employees Should Stand up to Hostile Bosses



What should you do if your boss is a bully and acts mean and hostile toward you? A new study surprisingly found that employees who had hostile bosses were better off on several measures if they returned the hostility.

The study found that employees felt less like victims when they retaliated against their bad bosses, experiencing less psychological distress, more job satisfaction and more commitment to their employer.

Hostile bosses were ones who did things such as yell at, ridicule and intimidate their workers. Employees who returned hostility did it by ignoring their bosses, acting like they didn't know what their bosses were talking about and giving just half-hearted effort.

The research involved data from two related studies.

The first study included 169 people who completed two surveys by mail, seven months apart. The respondents first completed a 15-item measure of supervisor hostility, which asked participants to rate how often their supervisors did things such as ridiculing them and telling them that their 'thoughts and feelings are stupid.' The participants reported how often they retaliated by doing things such as ignoring their supervisor.

Seven months later, the same respondents completed measures of job satisfaction, commitment to their employer, psychological distress and negative feelings. Results showed that when bosses were hostile but employees didn't retaliate, the workers had higher levels of psychological distress, less satisfaction with their jobs and less commitment to their employer. However, employees who returned the hostility didn't see those negative consequences.

The second study involved an online survey of 371 people who were surveyed three times, each three weeks apart. The first survey asked respondents many of the same questions as the first study. The second survey asked questions designed to test if the employees felt like a victim in their relationship with their boss. And the third survey asked employees about career outcomes, such as whether they'd been promoted and were meeting their income goals.

Results from the second study also showed that employees who turned the hostility back on their bosses were less likely to identify themselves as victims, less likely to report psychological distress and more likely to be satisfied with and committed to their jobs.

Bennett Tepper, lead author of the study and professor of management and human resources at Ohio State University, said 'The best situation is certainly when there is no hostility. But if your boss is hostile, there appears to be benefits to reciprocating. Employees felt better about themselves because they didn't just sit back and take the abuse.'

'Of course, fighting against your boss may seem like a risky career move,' noted Tepper. 'In this second study, we wanted to see if employees who retaliated against their bosses also reported that their career was damaged by their actions,' he said. 'But in our survey anyway, employees didn't believe their actions hurt their career.'

Tepper said he believes employees who fight back may have the admiration and respect of co-workers.

But he added that the message from these findings shouldn't be that employees should automatically retaliate against a horrible boss. 'The real answer is to get rid of hostile bosses,' he said. 'And there may be other responses to hostile bosses that may be more beneficial.'

For more on workplace bullies, such as hostile bosses, see:

- How common workplace bullying is in Canada
- A workplace violence infographic.