

Why some abusive bosses get a pass from their employees

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Why do employees sometimes accept working for an abusive boss? A new study suggests that when a leader is seen as a high performer, employees are more likely to label abuse as just "tough love."

Results showed that workers were less likely to show hostility to abusive bosses when the leader's performance was high, and employees were even likely to think their career could be boosted by a successful—if abusive—[boss](#).

The findings suggest that employees may be reluctant to call a successful boss abusive—even if the behavior warrants it, said Robert Lount, lead author of the study and professor of management and human resources at The Ohio State University's Fisher College of Business.

"If employees see their boss as a successful leader, that seems to be incompatible with being abusive," Lount said. "So they label the abuse as something more positive, like 'tough love.'"

[The study](#) was published recently in the journal *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*.

The researchers conducted two studies. One involved a three-wave study of 576 workers in a variety of industries across the United States. Participants completed online surveys three times, each two weeks apart. They were asked about abusive behaviors by their boss, and how they would rate their leader's overall effectiveness.

For those participants who reported abuse, other questions aimed to find if employees would label their boss as an abuser, or if they thought he or she was more of a "tough love" type of leader. In the survey, tough love bosses were described as "stern but caring," "insensitive but nurturing" and "rough but well-meaning."

The results showed that when employees rated their bosses as higher on use of abusive behavior—like using ridicule and saying an employee's thoughts and feelings were stupid—the label they put on their supervisor depended somewhat on performance.

When they rated the boss as a high performer, workers were more likely to label their abusive boss as a "tough love" kind of supervisor. But when the boss's performance was seen as lower, employees were more likely to give them the abuser label.

Why might abusive bosses be seen differently if they are successful?

Study co-author Bennett Tepper, also a professor of management and human resources at Ohio State, said employees may be looking for a silver lining of sorts.

"These bosses may treat employees harshly, but presumably their intent is to help their followers realize their potential—that's the 'tough love' part," Tepper said.

"And if the leaders have high performance, that suggests they are successful at bringing out the skills of their followers."

Employees of abusive but successful bosses may not have liked the abuse—but they reported that they expected something good to come out of their bad situation. Findings showed these workers were more likely than others to think they would be promoted within their organization—presumably because of their experience working for a successful boss.

In addition, employees were less likely to lash out at abusive bosses who were high performers, by disobeying them or giving them the silent treatment.

A second study examined how the dynamic of working for an abusive and successful leader plays out in real time in a lab experiment.

In this case, 168 [undergraduate students](#) participated in a study in which they were told they were working in teams online led by an MBA student. Teams would compete against each other to solve a campus problem. (In actuality, there were no teams or leaders.)

Participants in the study read a message on their computer screen that was supposedly from their team leader, but was actually from the researchers. The researchers sent participants one of two messages—either abusive or not.

The abusive message supposedly from the MBA leader told the undergrads, "Don't waste my time coming up with stupid ideas! Do better than a typical undergrad and don't embarrass us!" The non-abusive message simply encouraged participants to "try hard."

Participants developed ideas which were then supposedly assessed by their team leader and sent on to experts for evaluation. Later, all participants received one of two messages: one said that their team performed well above average compared to the other [teams](#), according to the experts. The other said their team performed well below average.

Participants were then asked to evaluate their leader. And sure enough, participants who received the abusive message tended to give their leader a lower score on being abusive when their team was above average than when it was below average.

"We found that in a very short amount of time, you could quickly abate abusive labeling of a boss with high performance," Lount said.

"Just finding out your team did better because of your leader's judgment really dampened the willingness to label that person as abusive—even though your leader made the exact same statements as the other leaders who were called abusive after a below-average performance."

Lount and Tepper emphasized that their study isn't saying that abusive behavior can make some leaders successful. There is overwhelming evidence from years of research that abusive leadership is not good for employees or organizations, they said.

In fact, other research suggests that successful bosses known for their "tough love" approach might be even more successful if they used more accepted management techniques.

Instead, this study is about how employees respond to abusive supervision, according to the researchers.

"I think our data really speak to how followers react to leaders who are both abusive and successful. They're hesitant to call them abusive. Employees think they can't be abusive because they are successful," Lount said.

The findings may also suggest why, even today, some abusive bosses can have long careers, Tepper said.

"The bosses who get away with abusive behavior may be those who somehow find a way to get high performance despite their behavior," Tepper said.

"Their [high performance](#) insulates them from the consequences because even their employees say he's just a 'tough love' kind of boss."

More information: Robert B. Lount et al, "Abuser" or "Tough Love" Boss?: The moderating role of leader performance in shaping the labels employees use in response to abusive supervision, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.obhdp.2024.104339](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2024.104339)

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