

3-6-2017

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University of Dayton

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Recommended Citation

University of Dayton. "Researching Silence" (2017). http://wayback.archive-it.org/4727/20170410173232/https://www.udayton.edu/news/articles/2017/03/researching_silence.php

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NEWS

Monday March 6, 2017

Researching Silence

It's a vicious cycle, researcher Christian Kiewitz says. A boss yells at his employee. The employee is afraid to lose his job and stays silent about it. And the abusive behavior continues.



There's a clear relationship between abuse by supervisors and fear and silence by employees, Kiewitz found in his latest study. It's a problem that is hurting businesses.

"If you have an organization that is ruled by fear, don't be surprised if people will not speak up," said Kiewitz, professor of organizational theory and behavior in the University of Dayton School of Business Administration. "Don't be surprised if people will not share important information with you, and don't be surprised if the abuse continues."

Kiewitz is an expert on workplace aggression and abusive supervision — sustained hostile behavior by a supervisor toward a subordinate that does not include physical violence. While shootings in the workplace make headlines, Kiewitz said it's much more common for workers to experience low-level aggressive incidents.

"Your boss yells at you. Your co-worker doesn't forward an important email to you or keep you in the loop. Somebody might sabotage you," he said. "For most employees, experiencing physical workplace aggression or violence is not the norm. Instead what we experience is hostility."

Kiewitz was the lead author on the study, "Suffering in silence: Investigating the role of fear in the relationship between abusive supervision and defensive silence," which was published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*. He says while researchers have long focused on employees who speak out, looking at silence is something newer.

"The assumption was silence is the absence of voice," he said. "But you have to look at: Why is it that people keep silent? Silence is intentionally withholding information, so the motive behind the silence is really important."

He explains when subordinates remain silent because they fear their managers, it also results in more abusive supervision down the road. The effects can include people leaving, sabotaging their bosses or losing their emotional attachment to their company, he said.

“The point you can make is this is really hurting the organization,” he said.

Kiewitz said while his research does not prescribe what to do in cases of abusive supervision, one way to break the cycle is to get top management involved.

“It comes back to what kind of a culture you want to have in your organization,” he said. “The best way of dealing with abusive supervisors is not to have them in the first place.”

More information on the research is online from [LSE Business Review](#) and the [American Psychological Association](#).

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