

Mixed signals from the top get in the way of employees' improvement efforts

*When employees propose new ways of doing things, this inevitably challenges the status quo at work. How they think the hierarchy will welcome these initiatives influences their decision to adopt this type of improvement-oriented behaviour. **Jean-Sébastien Boudrias, Vincent Rousseau, and Denis Lajoie** write that conflicting messages from a supervisor and the manager above the supervisor can in some cases have highly negative effects on employee improvement initiatives.*

Change-oriented behaviours by employees are more than ever crucial to foster organisational efficacy and agility in the volatile and uncertain business environment. One type of these behaviours is self-started improvement efforts made by employees in the context of their jobs.

Improvement-oriented behaviours entail that employees propose new ways of doing things to gain efficiency in [the way work is accomplished](#). Inevitably, these behaviours challenge the status quo in a work setting. The scientific literature clearly indicates that the adoption of this type of improvement-oriented behaviour [depends](#) in large part of [how the employees think](#) that the hierarchy will welcome them.

Past studies indicate that employees increase discretionary improvement behaviours when they perceive [integrity](#) on the part of organisational [decision-makers](#), and [conversely](#), that lack of integrity and perception of [abusive leadership](#) from managers discourage the adoption of such behaviours. Indeed, employees expecting that management will not welcome these behaviours—or worse, that these behaviours will be punished or used by managers in a self-serving manner—will not display improvement-oriented behaviours.

However, an organisation is not a monolithic entity. Different actors in the hierarchy could therefore send both positive and negative cues regarding the extent to which improvement-oriented behaviours are valued by the management. An employee can therefore face mixed or conflicting cues in relation to the desirability of improvement-oriented behaviours within the organisation.

Our study

Based on this premise, we conducted a [multilevel study](#) to test a model of what happens when actors at different levels in the hierarchy (manager, supervisor, employee) send or are exposed to different cues in relation to improvement-oriented behaviours. To have a comprehensive picture of factors leading to improvement-oriented behaviours in the organisation studied (public security), we sought to answer the following two research questions:

- 1- How do perceptions of integrity by actors in higher-managerial position influence managerial practices and, in return, the attitudes and behaviours of employees in lower positions in the organisation?
- 2- What happens when employees are exposed to a mix of favourable/unfavourable cues in relation to improvement behaviours from their immediate supervisor and the manager one level above?

Our results and implications

In relation to the first question, we found that the perception of lack of integrity in the organisation at the top level (manager) is an element of the work context that has far-reaching effects on attitudes and behaviours of employees at the lowest hierarchical level. Specifically, this context led higher-level managers to use more dysfunctional forms of leadership, which further predicts a reduction of improvement-oriented behaviours by employees.

Interestingly, we found no evidence for a cascade model in which manager dysfunctional leadership is translated in dysfunctional leadership from supervisors at the next hierarchical level to negatively impact improvement-oriented behaviours displayed by employees. The conclusion of our study, in line with [previous qualitative observations](#), is that managers' restrictive behaviours could have a heavy impact by themselves in setting an unfavourable context for employee initiatives aiming at disrupting the status quo. Given that restrictive or dysfunctional behaviours from managers were explained by perceptions of organisational integrity, the implication of this result is that the top management team should ensure, either by their own behaviours and organisational policies, that upper management maintain a strong level of ethics and integrity.

In relation to our second question, we found that managers' dysfunctional leadership could have highly negative effects on employee improvement-oriented behaviours in certain conditions, but modest effects in other conditions. The most negative effects are observed when employees have a mix of *negative* cues from their managers and *positive* cues from their supervisors in relation to job improvement. Following the [social information processing theory](#), we reasoned that this incoherence could lead employees to search for additional information enabling them to understand their work context and to determine their actions. This context of mixed cues can therefore make more salient that the higher-level managers are not receptive to improvement behaviours or could take advantage of employees trying to implement their ideas. In contrast, restrictive leadership practices from the manager had little impact on employees when their supervisors did not send favourable cues about involvement and change-oriented initiatives.

This result adds a novel perspective in the literature. It suggests that the behaviours and practices at one hierarchical level (e.g., manager) is more likely to have an effect two level below (e.g., employee) if the intermediate level (e.g., supervisor) makes these behaviours and practices more salient for the employees. As such, our results indicate that supervisors could amplify the negative effect of perceptions and behaviours that could reduce employee improvement-oriented behaviours. Given that our study also shows that supervisors are not mere replicators of managers' behaviours, we have a recommendation for organisations. Organisations that want to encourage improvement-oriented behaviours should make attempts to regularly survey their members to check if there are incoherencies in their first-level supervisor's and upper-level managers' attitudes and behaviours in relation to job improvement. This information could be used to meet with units that show more contrast and reinforce the type of leadership expected to increase employees' change-oriented initiatives and further ensure organisational agility.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on [How Lack of Integrity and Tyrannical Leadership of Managers Influence Employee Improvement-Oriented Behaviors](#), *Journal of Business Ethics* (2020).
- The post represents the views of the author(s), not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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