

People feel much better when they get right back at an abusive boss

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Imagine that your boss is abusive toward you. He or she regularly yells at you, belittles you in front of your co-workers, or prevents you from forming productive relationships with others at work. Interacting with a hostile boss is likely to leave you feeling scarred and defeated. You may experience dissatisfaction with your life or job, symptoms of depression, and/or an inability to fulfil your career goals.

So, what can you do to prevent your boss from behaving abusively or to make yourself feel better when your boss is abusive? In other words, how do abused employees cope? Coping with supervisor abuse is challenging and people may use a variety of strategies. One of them is to quit and move on to a hopefully more pleasant and productive work environment. However, for many, quitting may not be a viable option.

For those who do not quit, a frequently used coping strategy involves avoiding the supervisor. Avoidance takes many forms, including leaving the room when the boss enters, not answering their phone calls and emails, or using silence to stay under their radar (e.g., not speaking up when problems come up, going out of one's way to not answer direct questions, or not asking questions when one needs information or assistance). Another way to deal with the situation involves direct confrontation, such as pointing out when the boss "crosses the line" and questioning when they use power inappropriately.

Yet, studies of the effectiveness of avoidance and direct confrontation reveal a cruel irony. Our [research](#) suggests that abused employees feel more comfortable using avoidance than direct confrontation; but those who cope by directly confronting their abusive boss experience better psychological health. In other words, avoidance, the coping strategy that abused employees are more likely to use, is less effective.

In our studies, we explored whether there are benefits for abused employees who "give it right back" to the boss. It may seem odd for them to express hostility toward their supervisor. They may put their livelihoods at risk by being insolent or insubordinate, especially with an abusive boss. However, we find that the hostile behaviour involves

covert acts – behaviours that are performed “out of sight” or in a stealthy way that gives them plausible deniability. For instance, these employees may gossip about their boss, fail to give them critical information in a timely fashion, or agree to perform their request but fail to follow through as requested.

There are reasons to believe that responding to an abusive supervisor with hostility may make things worse for abused employees. Our research suggests that the opposite is true. In our two studies, returning hostility against an abusive boss reduced the detrimental effects of the abusive treatment. People who reciprocated the hostility reported higher levels of satisfaction with the job, commitment to the organisation, psychological health, and satisfaction with their career progress.

Further analysis provided clues as to why returning hostility seems to “work” for employees. An unfortunate consequence of being abused by a boss is that people may come to see themselves as victims. We found that those who reciprocate the hostility are less likely to feel like a “victim” compared to abused employees who do not. People generally do not want to see themselves as a helpless target. Our research revealed that fighting back against an abusive boss inoculates employees from seeing themselves as weak and vulnerable, and this feeling explains why this seems to be an effective coping strategy.

Does this mean that people should be encouraged to match the hostility of their abusive bosses? No! Although it may be personally beneficial for abused employees to use hostility to avoid seeing themselves as victims, such behaviour does not benefit other organisational members, or the organisation itself. Employee hostility produces a work environment characterised by low morale and low productivity – a place where nobody wants to work. For these reasons, organisations should be proactive about eliminating hostile behaviours (by either supervisors or employees in general) and encouraging employees to respond to abusive bosses in ways that benefit everyone.

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Notes:

- This post is based on the authors' paper [On The Exchange of Hostility With Supervisors: An Examination of Self-Enhancing and Self-Defeating Perspectives](#), in *Personnel Psychology*, Volume 68, Issue 4, pages 723–758, Winter 2015.
- This post gives the views of its author, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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