

Too many firms ignore their abusive boss problem

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Not many employees expect that fearing their boss [may be part](#) of their work experience. Yet that expectation might have better prepared scores of Atlanta school principals to work under Beverly L. Hall, the superintendent who [“ruled by fear](#): Principals were told that if state test scores did not go up enough, they would be fired — and 90 percent of them were removed in the decade of Dr. Hall’s reign”.

It might also have better prepared an unnamed resident at a University of California hospital who noticed a problem with a fetal monitoring strip on a woman in labor. The resident feared contacting “the attending physician, who was [notorious for yelling](#) and ridiculing the residents”. The baby later died.

The incident illustrates the findings of a 2005 report by the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses aptly called [“Silence Kills”](#). However, this issue is not confined to health care. After charging General Motors with a record \$35 million fine over failures to disclose a deadly ignition-switch defect, federal safety regulators also noted that [“literally, silence can kill”](#).

While such dramatic outcomes might not extend to the average employee, they exemplify a paradoxical situation: although we live in the so-called ‘information age’, many employees do not share work-related ideas, insights, or knowledge with others in their organization, opting to remain silent instead. One likely motivation is to protect oneself from the possible backlash for voicing out opinions or just even making a suggestion. This fear-induced silence affects the bottom-line: because “employees withhold vital input out of fear,” CEB estimates that “nearly half of executive teams [lack the information they need](#) to manage effectively”.

So, who is to blame? When it comes to employee silence, [practitioners](#) and [academics](#) repeatedly mention two main culprits: abusive superiors and a work climate where employees fear speaking up. Yet, while accounts by [practitioners](#) brim with [colorful illustrations](#), there is hardly any empirical research by academics on the readily conceivable argument linking non-physical (i.e., emotional) abuse by supervisors to employees’ fear and silence.

Why? One major reason is that academics used to view [silence](#) merely as the [absence of speaking up](#). Aimed at changing this view, scholars recently noted that silence is better understood as its own behavior: keeping silent is

something that one [actively chooses](#) to do. As such, the underlying motive for an [employee's silence](#) may involve trying to protect others, resignation, or fear.

Given the two main culprits for employee silence, abusive supervisors and climates of fear, we examined both in [our study](#) on fear-based, or defensive, silence. In particular, we sought to show empirically that abusive supervision leads to fear reactions in employees who in turn would engage in defensive silence behaviors. Conceptualizing [abusive supervision](#) as sustained, hostile, and nonphysical behavior directed against subordinates, our analyses showed support for that effect. In other words, supervisors who ridicule, berate, manipulate, and otherwise emotionally abuse employees create fearful employees who withhold information in order to protect themselves.

Furthermore, we found a significant relationship between fear-based silence and employees' perceptions of supervisors being abusive one year later. The implication is, then, that abusive supervisors get away with their behavior because subordinates remain silent. Thus, abusive supervision, fear, and silence create a vicious cycle. The more employees fear their supervisors, the more they remain quiet, and the more their supervisors engage in the behaviours that made employees fearful to begin with.

We also found that perceiving one's immediate work environment as one permeated by fear enhances the tendency of employees to remain silent. For illustration, let us return to those American critical-care nurses mentioned above by way of a follow-up study. What was the situation for them five years later? "[Silence still kills](#). Essentially, many clinicians still live in a culture of fear with respect to their ability to challenge a colleague or superior regarding patient safety issues".

Unfortunately, UK nurses do not seem to fare much better. In the aftermath of the Stafford hospital scandal, the Chief Executive of the Royal College of Midwives, Cathy Warwick, told the [Guardian](#): "We hear far too often from midwives who are genuinely petrified about raising the alarm bell over poor quality of care They fear that senior managers will come down on them hard simply for raising concerns".

So, what is to be done? One mitigating factor we examined was how assertive employees [rated themselves](#). As hypothesized, the effects we found were less negative for those employees who were more comfortable standing up and speaking out for their own interests and concerns. Yet, we doubt the solution to this problem is assertiveness training (although it might not hurt). It is likely that even the most assertive employee falls silent when speaking up does not produce change in the work environment or the behavior of superiors.

Which brings us to the role of management. While some, like hedge fund CEO Ray Dalio, strive to [remove fear](#) from their company's culture, still too many managers and organizations ignore the issue, or worse, seem to think that abuse and fear are recipes for success ([Amazon anybody?](#)). The examples above suggest that when abuse and fear run rampant, both employees and organizations suffer. A better strategy for tapping the full potential of an organization's human resources? Our research suggests to get rid of the fear and the [jerks](#).



Notes:

- This article is based on [Suffering in silence: Investigating the role of fear in the relationship between abusive supervision and defensive silence](#), *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol 101(5), May 2016, 731-742.
- The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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