

Bosses Can Spot Self-Serving Workers

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Supervisors are surprisingly accurate at distinguishing between employees who put in extra effort out of altruistic concern for the company, and those who suck up just to get ahead, according to a new study from a team of Canadian psychological scientists.

Study author Magda Donia of the University of Ottawa and her co-authors, Gary Johns of Concordia University and Usman Raja of Brock University, described hardworking employees as falling into one of two camps: so-called good “soldiers” and good “actors.”

While both groups of may go above and beyond on the job, good “soldiers” are motivated to help their colleagues out of sense of altruism, whereas good “actors” see helping out as a self-serving opportunity to make themselves look good.

Donia and colleagues hypothesized that while actors are on the lookout for flashy opportunities to get themselves publicly noticed for their good deeds, soldiers consistently lend a helping hand — even when there’s no one around to applaud them.

For example, a subordinate who is motivated by genuine concern for the company might volunteer to take on low-key tasks that won’t necessarily help advance their career, like rinsing the coffee pot or fixing a printer jam. On the other hand, employees with self-serving motivations only offer to help out in situations where they’re likely to get noticed by the boss.

For their study, the researchers recruited 197 bank tellers and 47 of their supervisors from 21 branches of an English-speaking multinational bank in Pakistan.

Employees filled out surveys asking them to rate their genuine concern for the organization, desire to help colleagues, and their concern about leaving others with a good impression. Supervisors then rated their direct subordinates on these same criteria.

The results suggest that supervisors really do notice when workers are motivated because they genuinely care about their work and colleagues.

“As predicted, supervisors make accurate attributions of their subordinates’ motives. In all cases, supervisors were effective in distinguishing between selfless and self-serving motives,” the Donia and colleagues in the *Journal of Business Psychology*.

However, because the bank branches included in the study were small and supervisors and subordinates worked closely together within view of each other, supervisors may have been in a unique position to closely monitor their subordinates’ behavior. Further research is needed to see if supervisors in different kinds of work settings show the same accuracy in assessing employees’ true motivations.

While there is evidence that a self-serving orientation can pay in terms of personal advancement and promotion, the results of this study suggest that helping out for its own sake could be an effective long-term strategy for getting ahead at work, lending additional support to psychological scientist Adam Grant’s advice for professional success: “By shifting ever so slightly in the giver [selfless] direction, we might find our waking hours marked by greater success, richer meaning, and more lasting impact.”

Reference

Donia, M. B., Johns, G., & Raja, U. Good Soldier or Good Actor? Supervisor Accuracy in Distinguishing Between Selfless and Self-Serving OCB Motives. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 1-10. DOI: 10.1007/s10869-015-9397-6