

One rude worker poisons a whole office, study finds

Second-hand rudeness also affects ability to do complex tasks

BY TOM SPEARS, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN AUGUST 20, 2009



Workplace rudeness reaches new heights in TV's *The Office*, starring Steve Carell

Photograph by: Handout, The Ottawa Citizen

OTTAWA — Rudeness aimed at just one person can spread its damage “like fire” through a workplace, causing large numbers of workers to do a lousy job and even harbour dark, murderous thoughts.

Psychologists knew a blast of rudeness would distract the immediate victim.

But second-hand rudeness?

Witnesses to rudeness also suffer a loss of cognitive powers and the ability to be creative, says a study by Amir Erez, a psychologist at the University of Florida’s school of management.

It’s just bad business, he says: One toxic employee can poison a whole office with a few angry outbursts and four-letter words.

“Managers should be very concerned because the negative consequences of rudeness on the job are

not limited to the person who happens to be the victim,” he said. “If five other people are watching, the effects are going to spill over into the rest of the organization.”

Three separate experiments all confirmed the same effect.

The psychologists gathered volunteers to do cognitive tests (rearranging scrambled letters to form words) and a creative test (thinking of unusual uses for a brick).

The person supervising the test was rude to one volunteer who was secretly part of the plan. “What are you, stupid? Get on with it!” he snapped, and called the volunteer unfit to hold a job in the “real world.”

After this, the rest of the volunteers had trouble unscrambling words and thinking of creative uses for a brick.

Worse, their dark sides took over.

One of the scrambled words was “demure,” but several volunteers rearranged the letters to spell “murder” — even though the letters weren’t quite right.

And the new ways to use brick? “Kill people,” one suggested. Trip someone, said another. Throw it through a window, or beat people up, said others. And as they thought about attacking people, they came up with fewer useful ideas.

Their short-term memories also suffered. They were less likely to help with teamwork.

All this stunned Erez, though now that he has published the results, everyone he talks to says: Sure, I’ve seen that happen at work.

“Everybody recognizes that it happens all the time,” he said.

He calls the results “very, very disturbing because it means they (people who witness rudeness) are being hostile themselves, and they’re not aware of it. Which means it can spread like fire. They watch as somebody is rude, and they themselves are primed to be rude.

“It affects mostly the ability to do complex tasks. And in the modern organization, that is what people do. They need to do complex problems; they need to be creative.”

The study is published in a research journal, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*.

Erez is moving on to the retail world, measuring how rude customers damage a worker’s ability to count money, react quickly and remember a customer’s order.

“This all surprised me, because I thought the effects would all be emotional,” he said. “But pretty much, it’s cognitive.”

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