LEADERSHIP MYTHBUSTERS:

distinguishing
the **facts**
from the **fads**

Christopher J Shen
Consulting psychologist
and member of a CEDA
Taskforce on Leadership

Simon Moss
Senior lecturer in
psychology at Monash
University

Do you praise your employees before criticising them?
Do you closely monitor unproductive employees?
These are just two of many long-held leadership practices
that are contradicted by recent scientific research.

Christopher J Shen and Simon Morris have examined
more than 20,000 articles to come up with 950 reasons
not to believe contemporary leadership theories.

To enhance their organisations and inspire employees, leaders extract information from many sources – training programs, management literature, business gurus, as well as their own experience and intuition. Research now reveals the information they use to guide their behaviour and decisions is often flawed and misguided. In fact, leaders are demonstrating a variety of misconceptions when they attempt to motivate, inspire, persuade, advise, assist and enhance their followers. Since 1997 we have scrutinised every major study in psychology, management, marketing and related fields to distil scientific discoveries that contradict conventional wisdom. This analysis of almost 20,000 articles has unearthed over 950 unexpected discoveries – that is, 950 findings that explode popular and destructive myths.

Resistance to criticism

Most leaders exhibit a variety of shortcomings when they attempt to address problems and shortfalls. Many leaders, for example, are encouraged to present praise before they criticise employees. A 2002 study demonstrated this approach is not always appropriate.[1] In the study participants were criticised several minutes after they had received either favourable or unfavourable feedback. The majority of participants – especially the individuals who usually felt unconfident – were less likely to resent the criticism if they had previously received unfavourable feedback.

In particular, if unconfident employees receive praise they momentarily perceive themselves as worthy. They feel proud, even confident. Subsequent criticisms induce a sudden, dramatic shift from a belief they are worthy to the perception that

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they are incompetent. After this abrupt decline they feel particularly upset and devastated. They are more likely to feel upset in response to criticisms if they have previously been praised.

On the other hand, employees are more likely to embrace the criticisms they receive after they consider their own strengths. Immediately before performance appraisals employees could be asked to list many of their qualities and attributes, such as "I am proficient in accounting" or "I am creative". Employees should then rate the extent to which they believe they are granted opportunities to utilise these traits at work. Together with their leaders, they should identify roles they could assume in the future to utilise these qualities. After this process, employees become more receptive to the criticisms they receive.

The utility of this approach was first established in recent research on self-esteem.[2] In this study, many pairs of words appeared on a screen. Each pair included the term "I" coupled with a desirable adjective such as "creative". Participants were more likely to agree with a criticism they received after they read these words, compared to before. Even reading desirable words alongside the letter "I" was enough to overcome resistance to criticism.

Research reveals that leaders who attempt to address a problem – such as an unmotivated or unproductive employee – inadvertently tend to focus their attention and resources towards one of the insignificant causes of this issue. That is, they seldom resolve the principal cause.

To illustrate, consider a male employee who often commits errors at work. Suppose he commits errors only when he feels both distracted by noisy colleagues as well as stressed. Typically, leaders perceive the more frequent of these causes as the primary source of the problem. For example, suppose the noise is more frequent than is the stress. Leaders assume the noise, not the stress, is the principal cause of these errors. A recent investigation revealed the less frequent of these causes is usually the primary source of the problem.[3]

Unproductive and unmotivated employees

Leaders also tend to respond unsuitably when the motivation and productivity of employees declines. Although tempting, unproductive and unmotivated employees should not be monitored or scrutinised too closely. When their manager monitors and records every act they undertake – every behaviour they exhibit – productivity and motivation tend to decline even further.

To demonstrate, unproductive and unmotivated employees feel the need to preserve their pride. They feel the need to ascribe their feeble performance to

Conflicts and aggression

A similar problem that leaders often manage ineffectively revolves around conflicts. To illustrate, leaders seldom respond appropriately to employees who demonstrate aggression – either verbal or physical – to other individuals. For example, managers do not trust aggressive, hostile employees and limit the scope or breadth of their responsibilities. That is, aggressive employees are trusted with only a confined range of tasks.

This practice has been scientifically demonstrated to exacerbate their aggression. In an important study on aggression conducted last year, participants completed a series of questionnaires that subtly assessed their own level of aggression and their propensity to experience boredom.[4] In this study, aggressive employees were shown to be especially prone to boredom. They were more likely than peers to feel frustrated and exhibit antagonism and hostility whenever their role was monotonous. Leaders should ensure that employees who often seem aggressive or hostile receive a variety of tasks and roles. Aggressive employees should be given the opportunity to apply a diverse range of skills, as well as work with a variety of individuals each month.

Paradoxically, leaders often assign too many responsibilities to employees who do not seem aggressive. Most leaders presuppose that employees are more inclined to be dedicated and committed at work after they are assigned a broader range of responsibilities. In some instances, however, employees are actually more likely to be absent, late or unmotivated after they are assigned diverse tasks and duties.

This issue was investigated thoroughly in a study which revealed that employees who receive more responsibilities unwittingly expect they will receive some form of compensation, such as a pay rise or health insurance.[5] Often, these employees do not receive any compensation and unconsciously feel entitled to cultivate these benefits themselves. As a consequence they may arrive late to work, feign illness, or withdraw their effort as a form of compensation. In other words, whenever employees are granted a broader range of responsibilities they should receive some form of compensation, such as pay rise or more days of annual leave.

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limitations in their effort rather than capacity. That is, they feel less ashamed if they are perceived to be unmotivated rather than unskilled. As a consequence, they deliberately withdraw effort from their activities. However, if their performance is not monitored closely they do not feel the urge to resort to these excuses. As these excuses dissipate they become more inspired rather than cynical.

This phenomenon was first observed in a 1998 study by two Polish scientists in which participants completed two intellectual activities.[3] After the first activity some participants were told their performance was inferior. These participants devoted less effort to the second activity, but only if their performance was monitored closely by someone else.

When employees are monitored closely they assume that unproductive, undesirable behaviours must be rife; otherwise, the organisation would not invest time and money to curb their incidence. Behaviours that are perceived as rife are therefore regarded as acceptable. So employees feel less ashamed when they engage in unsuitable, duplicitous behaviour.

Cooperation and ethics

Fortunately, leaders can also engage in a variety of behaviours to promote cooperation and cohesion rather than aggression and competition, but regrettably, few are aware of these practices. Few leaders, for instance, recognise that managers who engage in unconventional behaviours – such as standing on chairs to deliver speeches – are more likely to promote a sense of cohesion among employees.

Employees who experience an unusual event together tend to feel a sense of attachment to each other. This observation was discovered in a recent study in which individuals were assigned to teams and completed various challenging tasks.[6] In some of these teams the leader was encouraged to engage in a specific unconventional behaviour, such as suspend ideas from a clothesline. These teams exhibited elevated levels of cooperation and cohesion.

Leaders should occasionally encourage unusual, unforeseen behaviour. Employees could write some memos in crayons, or even convene a meeting in which everyone sits on the floor.

Rather than engage in unconventional behaviours, leaders typically institute practices that are very conventional. Leaders often introduce a series

of values and principles to govern the behaviour of employees. Almost every large organisation – and many smaller workplaces – have introduced a series of values and principles that employees must follow, such as cooperation, integrity, safety, innovation and progress. While vision and values statements might seem admirable, unfortunately – like the evil characters in "Scooby Doo" episodes – they become menacing and insidious once their veil is removed. According to recent studies, when organisations institute an official set of values employees can actually become less ethical and cooperative.

When these vision and value statements are introduced the decisions of employees are compromised. Rather than consider the outcomes of their behaviour, employees follow all rules and policies, even if this behaviour could disadvantage their colleagues. They often engage in acts they would previously have deemed as unsuitable, such as mocking colleagues they disrespect because the organisation values openness and integrity.

Managing conflict with innovation and inspiration

Official values may promote conflicts and disputes rather than cooperation or morality. Nevertheless, these conflicts and disputes do not necessarily undermine the workplace. Unfortunately, most leaders strive to create organisations that exhibit only cooperation, compromise, trust, respect, and naïve optimism and avoid all conflict or disputes. According to a plethora of studies, organisations that stymie conflict receive the same fate: stagnancy, frustration, and, ultimately, oblivion.

The impact of conflicts on creativity was investigated in a recent study on conflict management.[7] When employees were distrusting and suspicious of one another, most conflicts and disputes eventually escalated to personal criticisms and attacks. People did not consider each other's perspective and opinions, which curbed creativity, innovation and progress.

On the other hand, when employees were trusting and supportive, most conflicts – such as disputes about how to undertake various activities – sparked innovation, progress and performance. Attempts to reconcile contradictory perspectives tend to foster creative and original insights, which ultimately enhance productivity and efficiency.

Even the photographs that leaders attach to walls can influence creativity and innovation. For example, a study on conformity demonstrated that photographs of punks with spiked hair and torn clothes promoted independence and initiative.[8] When these employees received various problems to solve, they became more likely to express novel, original solutions rather than traditional, trite proposals. On the other hand, photographs of accountants in suits tended to promote compliance rather than independence. Photographs of

successful but anonymous individuals – such as executives in a boardroom – have also been shown to promote motivation and drive.

Nevertheless, most initiatives that leaders introduce to foster motivation tend to be futile. Employees are often encouraged, if not obliged, to formulate specific plans. These plans might comprise a sequence of specific, concrete activities: contact ten clients, conduct 15-minute interviews, identify their concerns, prepare a submission that redresses these concerns, convene a 20-minute meeting, and so forth.

Although generally unrecognised, when individuals construct plans with a specific sequence of concrete activities their inspiration declines. Employees become aware of various obstacles that could impede their aspirations. They begin to doubt the likelihood of their success, their enthusiasm dissipates and their excitement abates.[9]

All of these problems could be solved if leaders genuinely understood the needs, feelings, concerns and intentions of their employees. Usually, however, this understanding is limited.

Fortunately, leaders can engage in exercises that cultivate this understanding. For instance, you can try to ensure that people you interact with are located on your left. Many studies demonstrate that leaders can more readily decipher the emotions, feelings, and intentions of an individual who is located near their left rather than right shoulder. This is because the right hemisphere of your brain usually evaluates and analyses people that are located on your left side, and the right hemisphere tends to decipher emotions and feelings more effectively than the left hemisphere.

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