

How (not) to turn good soldiers into bad apples

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Citizenship or prosocial behaviours at work are important. These behaviours are not formally rewarded by financial incentives and yet serve critical functions. [A workplace](#) with high levels of citizenship and prosocial behaviours leads employees to be more productive, engaged, satisfied, experience less stress, and reduce turnover. As a result, many managers and organisations tend to encourage their employees to be more prosocial and engage in more citizenship behaviours in the forms of helping co-workers in difficult times, promoting the company's image to the public outside of work, and engaging in corporate volunteering programs.

While scholars have shown that citizenship behaviours have numerous benefits to the organisation, in a recent [paper](#) my colleagues and I explored the dark side of them. In three different studies with more than 1000 employees, we found a paradoxical effect of engaging in prosocial behaviours at work. Those who were initially most prosocial and engaged in the most citizenship behaviours were also among the most deviant at a later time; they were more likely to curse at someone at work, act rudely, lie, or steal from the organisation. Importantly, we found this effect to be consistent among all types of employees in terms of gender, tenure, age, and even across two very distinct cultures (China and the United States).

Why this paradoxical effect?

Our research draws upon a theory called "moral licensing". In a nutshell, moral licensing theory suggests that we view our sense of morality akin to a bank account. When we engage in prosocial behaviour, we "debit" our moral bank account. In contrast, we "credit" our moral bank account when we engage in deviance. Most of the time we want to maintain an equilibrium in which our moral bank account is close to zero. When we have accumulated enough moral credits, however, we tend to spend it. In other words, the prosocial acts that employees initially engage in help build up credits that can later license us to engage in deviance.

We also found that the key mechanism to moral licensing is an inflated sense of psychological entitlement. When employees engage in financially unrewarded prosocial behaviours, they build up a sense of entitlement, a belief that the organisation owes them something in return. We found that it is this sense of entitlement, as a result of prior

engagement of prosocial acts in organisation, which ultimately licenses future deviance. To give another example, consider how people generally feel after an intense workout. They tend to feel good about themselves and believe that they are entitled to something, and most people tend to overeat after sweating off hundreds of calories because the intense and difficult workout provides a license to engage in the exact opposite (and often more rewarding) behaviour subsequently.

In all three studies, however, we also observe an important distinction between being a good citizen at work because you *intrinsically want to* versus being a good citizen at work because you *feel pressured to* do so. For employees who are intrinsically motivated to engage in prosocial behaviours, they did not exhibit an inflated sense of entitlement and did not engage in as much deviance compared to employees who were extrinsically motivated (e.g., “encouraged” by one’s supervisors) to engage in prosocial behaviours.

So what should managers do to encourage prosocial behaviours at work without promoting deviance at the same time?

Our research suggests a few ways in which managers can enjoy the benefits of increased prosociality at work without simultaneously promoting deviance at a later time.

1. Reassess motivational tactics: Managers should customise their motivational tactics for each employee to ensure tapping into their intrinsic, rather than extrinsic, motivation.
2. Create informal, non-financial rewards for prosocial behaviour: Managers should learn to rely more heavily on informal rewards such as positive feedbacks and public praises to curtail the feelings of entitlement. For example, [research](#) suggests that people are much more motivated to engage in future prosocial behaviours when they can observe the prosocial impact of their work on others (e.g., finding out how staying at work late to cover for a sick co-worker helps alleviate stress and leads to better recovery of that co-worker).
3. Establish a prosocial culture: Managers should establish a prosocial culture in which more people are volunteering than not. That way, prosociality and volunteerism are no longer the exception but rather the norm. Doing so can reduce the salience of both entitlement and moral licensing.

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Notes:

- This blog post is based on the author’s paper [From Good Soldiers to Psychologically Entitled: Examining When and Why Citizenship Behavior Leads to Deviance](#), co-authored with Anthony C. Klotz, Wei He and Scott J. Reynolds, in *Academy of Management Journal*, February 1, 2017 vol. 60 no. 1 373-396
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