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Bad boss? Your heart may feel the heat

10:33 AM, November 25, 2008

Anyone who's been in the job market long enough has sooner or later worked for a bad boss -- the kind, perhaps, who makes you start awake at 3 in the morning to fret about the day ahead or the horrible day that just happened.

A new study suggests such bosses may increase the risk of a heart attack among employees, a finding that fits with other research on the effect of stress and powerlessness on physical health. (See, for example, the famous [Whitehall II study](#).)

The latest study, published online today in the journal Occupational and Environmental Medicine, tracked 3,122 working Swedish men ages 19 and 70 at the study's start. Their health was checked between 1992 and 1995 and their heart health outcomes tracked all the way up to 2003. At the start of the study the men were also asked to rate their managers' leadership skills for such issues as -- per the paper -- "consideration for individual employees, provision of clarity in goals and role expectations, supplying information and feedback, ability to carry out changes at work successfully, and promotion of employee participation and control."

During the period of time that was monitored, there had been 74 cases of [ischemic heart disease](#) (problems caused by narrow heart arteries, such as angina and heart attacks). Higher leadership scores were associated with a lower heart disease risk -- and the longer an employee worked at the same job with a good manager the lower his risk became. And vice versa.

The researchers do note the possibility that the heart outcomes may have more to do with the personality of the people doing the rating -- after all, the bad-boss-good-boss perceptions were made by the employees themselves.

But, they write in their paper, "if the association is causal, this study suggests that interventions aimed at improving the psychosocial work environment and preventing ischaemic heart disease among employees could focus on concrete managerial behaviors, such as the provision of clear work objectives, information and sufficient control in relation to responsibilities."

Of course, one can think of other good reasons management might want to improve workforce leadership skills -- such as making a workplace more pleasant (even if people aren't going to have heart attacks) and enhancing team performance.

-- Rosie Mestel

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