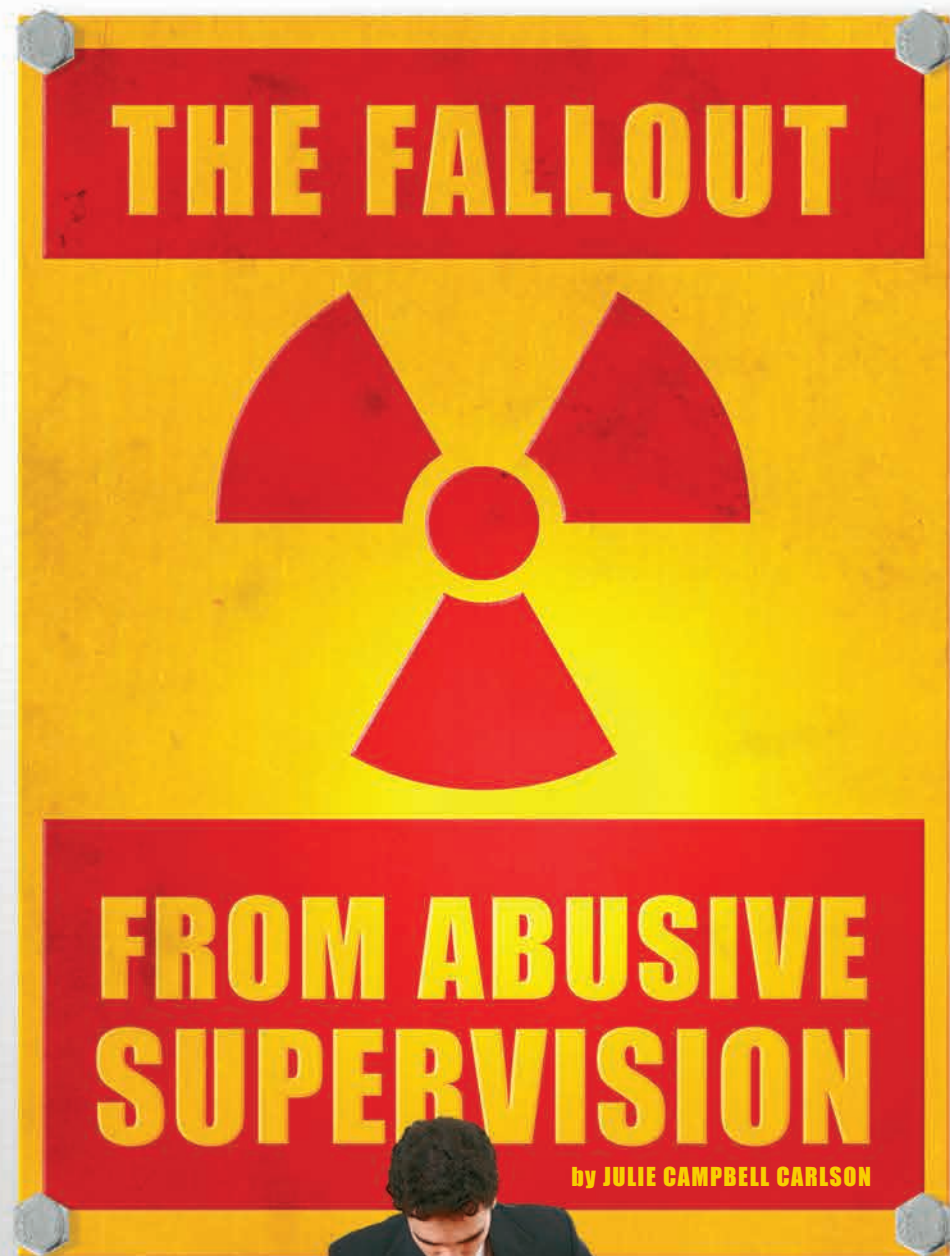


Each month, the senior partner in a law firm went over the billable hours of his staff. He then assembled them for the “award” ceremony. The staff cringed at what awaited them — the awarding of the “Golden Goat,” a one-foot tall statue of a goat that the person with the fewest number of billable hours had to carry around for a month. The junior lawyers, paralegals and legal secretaries felt getting the “goat” to be a humiliating experience.



The senior partner probably felt he was motivating his staff to work harder, but what he didn't realize is what a Baylor University professor discovered in recent research — that he was adversely affecting not only his subordinates but also their families with his abusive behavior.

**Dawn Carlson,**  
professor of  
Management and the  
H.R. Gibson Chair  
of Organizational  
Development, surveyed

280 full-time employees and their spouses to see if abuse suffered at work at the hands of supervisors (i.e., tantrums, rudeness, public criticism and inconsiderate action) crosses over to the subordinates' families. She found that indeed it does.

“We discovered that employees who feel they are belittled by

their supervisors have more work-family conflict and more tension with their spouse,” Carlson said.

The study, “The Fallout from Abusive Supervision: An Examination of Subordinates and Their Partners,” was published in *Personnel Psychology*, Vol. 64. The coauthors are Merideth Ferguson, Pamela Perrewe and Dwayne Whitten.

“Abusive supervision is a workplace reality, and this research expands our understanding of how this stressor plays out in the subordinate's life beyond the workplace,” Carlson writes.

RESEARCH  IN ACTION

**“ABUSIVE SUPERVISION IS A WORKPLACE REALITY,  
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For the research survey, employees were asked to respond to items following the prompt of, “How often does your supervisor use the following behaviors with you?” Example items included, “Tells me my thoughts or feelings are stupid,” “Expresses anger at me when he/she is mad for another reason,” “Puts me down in front of others” and “Tells me I'm incompetent.” Employees also were asked questions regarding their behavior at home, such as whether they were “too stressed to enjoy family activities.” Additionally, they were asked about their satisfaction with family life.

In their part of the survey, the respective spouses were asked such questions as, “Do you feel irritated by your spouse's behavior or tense from fighting and arguing with your spouse?” The survey also used a six-item family assessment device “designed to assess the overall level of family functioning.” This scale provided a snapshot of the general welfare of the family. Example items from the scale included, “Our family can express feelings to each other,” “Our family is able to make decisions about how to solve problems” and “Our family confides in each other.”

What Carlson found was that while employees thought they were leaving their problems at work, their spouses felt otherwise. “The employees think, ‘I don't think how I am treated at work will hurt my family,’ but it's actually hurting them more than they think,” she said.

Carlson said previous research has shown that tension at work spills over into the home, meaning that employees bring home that tension, but this new research shows that the

tension actually affects other members of the family and the family dynamics.

“We were able to get information from the spouses and learned there is a trickle-down effect that is more far reaching than we had previously demonstrated,” Carlson said. “We expected there would be work-family conflict, but we didn't expect the tension that develops between the spouses [because of the abusive work environment].”

Carlson saw first-hand how work can negatively affect family when she worked outside academia. In a situation similar to the “Golden Goat,” a coworker felt compelled to return to work the same day his wife had their first child in order to obtain his billable hours. This episode contributed to Carlson's decision to focus on work-family as her field of study during her doctoral program.

She has published numerous journal articles including, “Health and Turnover of Working Mothers after Childbirth via the Work-Family Interface: An Analysis Across Time” in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, “Work-family Enrichment and Satisfaction: Mediating Processes and Relative Impact of Originating and Receiving Domains” in the *Journal of Management* and “Deceptive Impression Management: Does Deception Pay In Established Workplace Relationships?” in the *Journal of Business Ethics*.

Her new research on abusive bosses has several implications for organizations. She said that organizations must take steps to prevent abuse and should offer support to those who find themselves in such a situation.

“There is a good deal of research being done on abusive supervision to understand why it occurs and what organizations can do to prevent it from happening,” she said. “I hope that future research can address this

so that we can minimize the occurrence and its trickle-down impact on family.”


She hopes to pass those research conclusions on to her students who will enter the job market.

“I teach graduate students that companies must have a zero-tolerance policy for this kind of behavior in the organization,” Carlson said. “We have zero tolerance for sexual harassment, and the same should apply [for abusive supervision].”

She also recommends that organizations employ 360-degree feedback evaluations, in which employees self-evaluate their performance and are evaluated by supervisors and peers. Done correctly, the evaluations can help organizations identify workers who abuse subordinates.

While Carlson said organizations must be held accountable for their supervisors' behavior, ultimately, the subordinate must take steps to remove him or herself from the abuse.

“If employees feel they are being abused, they should look toward employee assistance programs for help,” she said. “They can get support from coworkers, if they also are being abused; and they should do anything they can to avoid interaction with the abuser. But the bottom line is if they can't get any help or change, then they need to remove themselves from the situation. Abused employees often stay in the bad situation for the sake of their family, but they need to realize the situation is costing them in other ways to stay.”

 [bbr.baylor.edu/abusive-supervision](http://bbr.baylor.edu/abusive-supervision)