

# On the Safe Side

BY / JUSTIN WALKER

WORKPLACE SAFETY ENFORCEMENT MAY DEPEND ON WHETHER EMPLOYEES ARE ON A SUPERVISOR'S "GOOD SIDE" OR "BAD SIDE."

SARA PERRY

Does your boss like you? Do you like your boss? Do you at least feel like they treat you fairly? The answers to these questions can significantly impact safety enforcement in the workplace, Sara Perry, an associate professor of Management at the Hankamer School of Business, said.

Perry, along with Natalia Lorinkova from University Ramon Llull and Melih Madanoglu from Kennesaw State University, conducted a series of studies on the effects leaders have on the employee experience, specifically when it comes to stress. One of those studies included "Disparate Safety Enforcement: Curvilinear Effects, Mechanisms, and Boundary Conditions of Supervisor-Rated Leader-Member Exchange," published in the *Journal of Management*.

"In this particular study, we looked at the way that different relationships people may

have with their leaders can affect safety and the experience that employee has in a safety-related way," Perry said.

The research team was interested in understanding more about the leader perspective in leader-member relationships—identifying the leader's opinion of what the relationship is and how good the quality of said relationship is. The team also wanted to test that against the employee's perspective of how they felt the leader was treating them.

"We had this multiple source dataset that was really rich," Perry said. "That allowed us to test a fundamental component of leader-member exchange theory that hasn't been tested much, which is leaders actually do treat each employee differently based on the relationship they have with them."



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Perry and the team conducted three different studies as part of this paper. The first surveyed 145 front-line employees and 41 supervisors from a mid-Atlantic construction company. The second included 339 employees and 58 supervisors from four hotels in the southeast U.S. The final study consisted of 228 university students participating in an online, scenario-based experiment and survey.

The team found that leaders differentiate between how they enforce safety. Supervisors with low commitment to safety give the most intense attention to those they have the best and worst relationships with.

"Basically, my favorites and least favorites are who I pay attention to in terms of enforcing safety," Perry said. "It is a bias that emerges if I'm not as committed to this idea of safety and safety enforcement."

**This means employees** in the middle might be inadvertently ignored or forgotten by leaders. But for leaders with a high commitment to safety, that bias completely went away, Perry said.

"The relationship didn't matter anymore—the leader seemed to be less biased," she said. "They just overlooked whatever relationship they had with that person. They just treated everyone similarly."

The relationship dynamics that seem to matter the most are how much a leader likes their employees, how much they trust them, and how much care and concern they have for their individual needs, Perry said. If leaders can proactively work to overcome biases in these areas, they can potentially do the same regarding safety enforcement behaviors.

"Just be aware of it," Perry said. "In the realm of safety, the more committed you are to safety enforcement, the less biased you are going to be." 📌

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