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[Andrea Estrada](#)

Some Workplace Retaliation Deemed Acceptable, UCSB Economist Finds

When an employee suffers a perceived wrong at the hands of his or her boss, a degree of revenge is considered acceptable, according to a study by UC Santa Barbara labor relations expert Gary Charness. However, retaliating against one's boss is considered acceptable to most employees only if the retaliation is an act of omission or inaction, rather than an active effort to harm the boss in question.

The study, co-authored by Charness, a professor of economics at UCSB, and David Levine, a professor of economics at UC Berkeley, appeared late last year in the journal *Industrial Relations*. The paper is titled "When Is Employee Retaliation Acceptable at Work? Evidence From Quasi-Experiments."

"The basic idea is that there are factors that influence the degree to which an act of sabotage or employee retaliation is considered to be acceptable," said Charness. "Our survey results indicate that retaliation seems to be more acceptable if it is an act of omission instead of an act of commission." There are also demographic characteristics, he added, noting that respondents who are older, female, politically conservative, or in managerial positions typically showed less tolerance for retaliation, while union members tended to show a little bit more.

To conduct the study, researchers surveyed workers riding Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART), traveling to and from San Francisco and the East Bay. The 13-minute tunnel ride under the bay provided the perfect venue because the trains are regularly filled

with workers commuting to and from their places of employment.

The survey involved two scenarios. In the first, a manager who has sexually harassed a worker's friend asks that worker for assistance in finding a missing file. In the second, a manager unfairly passes over the employee for promotion and subsequently asks the employee for help in choosing an effective marketing plan. The boss is unaware that one plan will make another division look good, while the second plan will make the boss look good. The two scenarios were varied slightly and distributed in five different survey forms. Workers were asked to rate the retaliation on a scale of one to seven, from completely acceptable to completely unacceptable, and also to rate the degree of damage.

In the first scenario, hiding the file from the manager who sexually harassed the worker's friend was rated about one point less acceptable (on a seven-point scale) than was simply not telling the manager where the file could be found. When presented with the second scenario of recommending a marketing plan, respondents were pretty much split down the middle. Fifty-one percent said they would recommend what they considered the best plan, whether or not it benefited the manager; and 49 percent said they would recommend the plan that would make another manager and/or department look good.

However, when respondents were given the option of punishing the offending manager passively by merely ignoring his or her request, the number of people who supported some kind of retaliation rose from 49 percent to 59 percent, with the increase coming entirely among women.

According to Charness, the study holds valuable lessons for managers. "When something is about to go wrong or goes wrong, tell your employees why," he said. "Managers face high risks of both active retaliation and passive withdrawal of effort if employees are harmed by what they view as a conscious management choice. To the extent that employees are harmed, managers should be sure that employees see them sharing the pain, not profiting from employees' losses."

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