



Manuela Priesemuth, Assistant Professor
School of Business and Economics
mpriesemuth@wlu.ca or 519-884-0710 ext. 4428

Kate Tippin, Director of Marketing & Communications
School of Business and Economics
ktippin@wlu.ca or 519-884-0710 ext. 2948

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Impact of abusive supervision spreads well beyond targeted workers, Laurier researcher finds

WATERLOO – Bosses who bully employees jeopardize the morale and productivity of entire teams, a researcher at Wilfrid Laurier University's School of Business and Economics says.

"It crushes the motivation to work together," said Manuela Priesemuth, assistant professor in Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Management.

Working with University of Central Florida colleagues Marshall Schminke, Maureen L. Ambrose and Robert Folger, Priesemuth spent nearly four years studying the toxic effects of abusive supervision. The research involved almost 900 responses from workers surveyed anonymously among 222 work units, or groups, in Florida.

"When I started, I thought that groups would do something to stick together — the common-enemy effect," said Priesemuth. "I didn't find that."

Instead, the research indicates abusive supervision in the workplace tends to weaken "collective efficacy" — the bonds teams build for collaboration, motivation and the readiness to help each other.

"People are affected by observing (abusive) behaviour," said Priesemuth. "It happens in front of others and creates whole climates of toxicity. It doesn't happen in isolation. People share their experiences with co-workers."

Abusive supervision is an important workplace and societal topic, she adds. While some corporate cultures place faith in tough-love supervision, believing it encourages employees to work harder, "our research shows that it actually destroys entire departments, work groups, people, and even peoples' families," said Priesemuth.

A member of the Laurier faculty since July 2012, Priesemuth began the study while working on her doctorate at The University of Central Florida.

Companies need to have trustworthy steps in place to address reports of abusive supervision, she said. Workplace teams with strong collective efficacy, the study points out, do a better job of managing resources because they are better at analytical thinking and problem solving.

"Human capital is your greatest asset," said Priesemuth. "So it's important to treat employees in a fair manner and try to eliminate any bullying in organizations."

The *Academy of Management Journal* recently published the study.

Established in 1966, the Laurier School of Business and Economics is one of Canada's leading business schools, with 5,500 students enrolled in undergraduate, graduate and diploma programs. It is home to Canada's largest business degree co-op program. For more information, visit wlu.ca/sbe.