

## The worst kind of boss is not the one who's always a jerk

By Jena McGregor March 2

Would you rather have an unfair boss some of the time or all of the time?

The answer seems like it would be an obvious one. But it isn't.

A new study finds that employees are less stressed and have more job satisfaction when their bosses are always unfair than when their boss is unpredictable.

"Intuitively, you would think the more fairness you get, the better," said Fadel Matta, a researcher at Michigan State University and the lead author of the paper, in an interview. "But that's not what we demonstrated. It's better if supervisors are a consistent jerk than if they're fair sometimes and not fair other times. People want to know what they can expect when they come into work."

The study, which was [published online](#) in February by the Academy of Management Journal, performed two types of studies. In a lab experiment, college students had to estimate a hypothetical company's stock price using information about its performance. While they were told their peers would sit in another room and act as their supervisors, they were actually receiving feedback on the task from the researchers.

The students -- whose heart rates were being monitored during the experiment to test their stress levels -- were divided into three groups. A third consistently got feedback such as "thanks for your effort during the last round" or "it's great to work with a motivated person." A third repeatedly heard things like "all I can say is that I wish I was working with someone else" or "it sucks to work with an unmotivated person." Another third heard of a mix of the two.

To no one's surprise, those who got the consistently nice feedback fared best when it came to the heart rate monitoring. But those who consistently heard how much it sucks to work with them did better than those who sometimes heard compliments and sometimes got burned.

A second study asked nearly 100 workers in a range of companies and industries to fill out daily surveys over a three-week period about their perceptions of fairness. Their corresponding supervisors were also surveyed at the beginning of the study to measure their capability for self-control. Again, employees who had unpredictable managers were more likely to be stressed, dissatisfied with their jobs and emotionally exhausted than those who

said they were always treated unfairly.

"A lot of it centers around this issue of uncertainty," Matta said. "This notion of knowing what to expect -- even if it's bad -- is better than not knowing what to expect at work."



### **Animated GIF: Office Space - Bill Lumbergh just stands there and watches you while he sips his coffee over and over and over**

Uhmhhh, yeah.

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So what should companies do about managers whose behavior seems erratic? Matta said the key is coaching supervisors to help prepare their workers when potentially unfair outcomes are on the way.

"Sometimes you have to be unfair," he said. "There's only so many resources you can distribute, for instance. But if you say 'tomorrow this is going to be what's happening' -- then all of a sudden people aren't coming in not knowing what to expect. At least that uncertainty is mitigated." In other words, try to be fair. And when you can't be, don't keep 'em guessing.

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