

Leadership Takes Self-Control. Here's What We Know About It

by Kai Chi (Sam) Yam, Huiwen Lian, D. Lance Ferris, and Douglas Brown

JUNE 05, 2017



Philosophers and psychologists have been discussing the importance of self-control for ages. Plato, for example, argued that the human experience is a constant struggle between our desire and rationality, and that self-control is needed to achieve our ideal form. Likewise, Freud suggested that self-control is the essence of a civilized life.

The scientific study of self-control started about 25 years ago in the fields of criminology and psychology. Since then, hundreds of studies have shown the positive effects that come from possessing self-discipline. For instance, people with higher levels of self-control eat healthier, are less likely to engage in substance abuse, perform better at school, and build high-quality

friendships. At work, leaders with higher levels of self-control display more effective

leadership styles - they are more likely to inspire and intellectually challenge their followers, instead of being abusive or micromanaging. But what happens when people lack self-control at work?

We conducted a comprehensive review of research findings on employee self-control in a forthcoming paper in the *Academy of Management Annals*. Analyzing more than 120 management papers, we found that there are three main reasons why people occasionally lose self-control: 1) self-control is a finite cognitive resource; 2) different types of self-control tap the same pool of self-control resources; and 3) exerting self-control can negatively affect future self-control if it is not replenished. Think of self-control as analogous to physical strength: Our physical strength is limited, various tasks (e.g., football, basketball, walking, etc.) deplete it, and continued exertion can negatively affect future physical strength if it's not restored.

For example, our own research has found that service employees in leadership positions who have to force a smile in customer interactions (thereby exercising self-control to suppress their true feelings) are later less able to regulate their interactions with their subordinates - they lie and are more rude to them.

Our review identified a few consequences that are consistently linked to having lower self-control at work:

1. **Increased unethical/deviant behavior:** Studies have found that when self-control resources are low, nurses are more likely to be rude to patients, tax accountants are more likely to engage in fraud, and employees in general engage in various forms of unethical behavior, such as lying to their supervisors, stealing office supplies, and so on.
2. **Decreased prosocial behavior:** Depleted self-control makes employees less likely to speak up if they see problems at work, less likely to help fellow employees, and less likely to engage in corporate volunteerism.

3. **Reduced job performance:** Lower self-control can lead employees to spend less time on difficult tasks, exert less effort at work, be more distracted (e.g., surfing the internet in working time), and generally perform worse than they would had their self-control been normal.
4. **Negative leadership styles:** Perhaps what's most concerning is that leaders with lower self-control often exhibit counter-productive leadership styles. They are more likely to verbally abuse their followers (rather than using positive means to motivate them), more likely to build weak relationships with their followers, and they are less charismatic. Scholars have estimated that the cost to corporations in the United States for such a negative and abusive behavior is at \$23.8 billion annually.

Our review makes clear that helping employees maintain self-control is an important task if organizations want to be more effective and ethical. Fortunately, we identified three key factors that can help leaders foster self-control among employees and mitigate the negative effects of losing self-control.

First, sleep appears to have an amazing restorative effects on self-control. One study found that leaders who slept well at night (defined as having minimal interruptions to sleep) were much more likely to exercise their self-control and refrain from displaying abusive supervision, such as yelling and cursing at low-performing subordinates, compared to their counterparts who did not sleep well. Modern organizations often require employees to work beyond traditional office hours in the name of increased productivity. But this could be counter-productive and lead to negative workplace behaviors due to employees lacking self-control. Instead, organizations should be mindful about how long work hours can impact employees' behavior and wellbeing. Google, for example, installed sleep pods at the office to allow employees to nap and be reenergized.

Second, "service with a smile" might not always pay. Service-oriented organizations often force employees to smile in front of customers. While this might please customers in the short-term, it can cause other organizational problems. Dropping this practice

perhaps is not be a practical option, but companies should consider training employees to tap into the emotions they display. For example, another study showed that physicians who engaged in perspective taking and felt genuine empathy toward their patients did not experience reduced self-control and its associated negative workplace behaviors such as burnout, whereas physicians who were forced to fake empathic behaviors toward patients later reported increased burnout and lower job satisfaction. Service-oriented employees may also benefit from engaging in more perspective-taking rather than faking their emotions.

Third, creating the right environment may help prevent some of the negative behaviors associated with lower self-control. For example, we came across research showing that employees with low self-control were no more likely to engage in deviant behavior when organizations promoted an ethical culture –displaying the company’s code of conduct where employees could see it made them less tempted to behave unethically. This type of intervention tends to be very effective in the short-term.

Ultimately, the keys to avoiding self-control failures are to 1) allow the body to rest and restore self-control, 2) reexamine existing organizational policies that might inadvertently reduce employees’ self-control, and 3) create a culture that deters negative behaviors in moments of reduced self-control.

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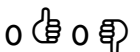
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