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RESEARCH WITHIN REACH

Replacing envy with positive empathy in the workplace

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Recognising exceptional individuals in the workplace is important, but how can companies do this without making high performers the targets of workplace envy?

Companies like Starbucks and McDonald's are famous for calling out their best-performing employees every month in the hope of motivating others to emulate the chosen high-achievers. But such recognition can sometimes have unintended consequences.

If people in the same team or workplace regard their reward and recognition program as a zero-sum game, where all but one are losers, they could become envious, even malicious, and try to undermine the best performer, discouraging everyone from doing their best. In such a situation, people would be more motivated to bring down the high performer rather than improve their own performance.

It's a problem that has attracted the interest of organisational behaviouralists like Deshani Ganegoda, an Associate Professor of Management at Melbourne Business School.

"No-one works alone these days," she says. "You work in teams and need to be a team player to collaborate, learn and ask questions of other people. You must be approachable and able to approach others, but envy is one of those emotions that doesn't let you do that."

Researchers categorise envy as a negative emotion, like guilt and anger, which makes us anti-social and unable to connect with others without betraying our negative feelings.

It can be a very destructive emotion to encourage in a team environment, which is why organisational behaviourists have started researching it in the hope of developing evidence-based reward and recognition practices that build team cohesion rather than destroy it.

Associate Professor Ganegoda has always been interested in researching the dark side of organisations, which is what drew her to examining envy.

"My overall research interest is negative behaviour and why people do negative things - what's the genesis of it? That's how I became interested in envy, but then I started questioning if it is the only way we can respond to someone else's success. We have all been happy for other people's positive outcomes, so why isn't anyone talking about that?"

This realisation led Associate Professor Ganegoda to consider the role of positive empathy in the workplace. Defined as feelings of happiness for someone else's positive outcome, positive empathy could play an important role in promoting cohesive teams and developing reward and recognition programs that support them. While precious little has been written about envy in the workplace, even less has been written about positive empathy, until Associate Professor Ganegoda and her colleague, Professor Prashant Bordia of the Australian National University, took up the challenge.

Their first paper on the subject, "I Can Be Happy for You, but Not All the Time: A Contingency Model of Envy and Positive Empathy in the Workplace", was published in the Journal of Applied Psychology in 2019. It offers the beginnings of a theoretical framework to help explain the feelings and thinking behind envy and positive empathy and the range of individual attributes and circumstances that can trigger them at work.

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The difference between envy and empathy

Associate Professor Ganegoda's goal is to understand what factors trigger the negative, self-focused feeling of envy as compared to the constructive, other-focused feeling of positive empathy when people react to others' successes. She hopes to use that knowledge to find ways to design organisations and systems that promote positive empathy rather than envy.

One example she cites as a powerful demonstration of positive empathy is the elation demonstrated by Eliud Kipchoge's pacesetters as they assisted him to become the first person to run a marathon in under two hours.

"When Kipchoge approached the finish line in Vienna in October 2019, the faces of those running with him and watching from the sidelines lit up as they realised what he was about to achieve," she says.

"Everyone was a participant in his imminent success and willed him to cross the line in record time. As humans, they couldn't help wanting a fellow human to lift the whole species and do what no one had done before."

Kipchoge's time of 1:59:40.2 was officially rejected because he was helped by a team of pacesetters who shielded him from headwinds – but his achievement does demonstrate our ability to enjoy another person's success.

The challenge for Associate Professor Ganegoda is to translate such a response to exceptional efforts in the workplace.

Because research into the subject is still in its infancy, her paper draws heavily on psychology research to build the theoretical framework to develop and measure positive empathy at work.

Psychologists say the ability to celebrate another person's success requires having the capacity to see an experience from the successful person's point of view.

In contrast to positive empathy, they distinguish two types of envy: malicious envy, where you feel pain when other people in your sphere are recognised as successful, motivating you to undermine them; and benign envy, where you also feel pain but fear losing status, so set out to improve your own performance.

While benign envy can be good to have in the workplace, it still involves the negative emotion of pain and an

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Deshani's research centres on the topics of behavioural ethics, organisational justice, negotiation, and workplace deviance. Her research has been published in Journal of Applied Psychology, Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, Journal of Organisational Behavior, Human Resource Management, Human Relations, and Personnel Review.

She currently teaches Organisational Behaviour and Negotiations on the MBA Program.

inward state of mind rather than the outward-reaching emotion of positive empathy, where you share and enjoy another person's success.

Positive empathy involves shifting from personal pain to feeling happiness for others, making it the perfect emotion to encourage in a team environment.

Associate Professor Ganegoda says her paper with Professor Bordia was just the beginning of a research program that she now has funding to advance further - but the potential benefits to organisations from her work so far are already clear.

In addition to examining reward and recognition programs, they include looking at organisational decision making, communication and hiring practices to identify ways to reduce workplace envy and promote positive empathy.

One of her favourite quotes comes from Gregg Popovich, who won the US National Basketball Association's Coach of the Year award three times.

"If I'm interviewing a young guy, and he's saying things like, 'I should have been picked All-American, but they picked Johnny instead of me', or they say stuff like, 'My coach should have played me more; he didn't really help me', I'm not taking that kid because he will be a problem, one way or another."

Promoting empathy in the workplace

A first step toward fostering positive empathy within teams would be to abandon exclusively zero-sum reward and recognition programs that single out individuals and trigger social comparison or fuel envy.

Psychologists say social status is central to how people view themselves and others, so managers should consider it seriously and try to treat their subordinates equally. As parents know, some favouritism is inevitable, but too much can fuel resentment and discourage everyone from doing their best.

Our sense of justice is similarly important, so managers should make fairness their yardstick to ensure that any reward or recognition is seen as deserved and appropriate to avoid aggravating team members and encouraging them to undermine an honoured colleague.

Good communication is important here. You don't need to stop recognising exceptional efforts by individuals, but you do need to explain why someone has been selected for special treatment, and why that decision is fair and equitable.

Providing opportunities for people to emulate another person's success is helpful too, perhaps through a mentoring program that allows others to learn from a high performer. Giving people a sense of control over opportunities to win recognition can motivate everyone in a team.

While promoting positive empathy can benefit organisations, Associate Professor Ganegoda says that managers also need to recognise that there are individual differences in people's capacity to feel positive empathy.

People with low self-esteem are often inclined to be envious. On the other hand, people who are more likely to experience positive feelings and those who feel connected to others are more inclined to feel positive empathy. However, the ability to experience positive empathy can be developed over time.

Also, if people like each other, they will empathise with each other more quickly. But even if they're reticent or new to each other, they can develop positive empathy gradually if they are encouraged to understand other people more.

Positive empathy can also be built by nurturing a sense of collective identity within a group through team-building exercises, social events to promote shared values and rotation of work activities.

Workgroups and shared tasks can be structured to encourage participants to see things from other points of view. When people begin to understand and experience another person's perspectives, they are more able to experience positive empathy for the other.

The psychology literature also says that teaching people how to express themselves, listen and interact with others has been shown to increase perspective-taking and positive empathy among physicians, police officers, teachers and other professional groups.

Positive empathy can also be built by nurturing a sense of collective identity

A shared identity across the organisation

Associate Professor Ganegoda suggests that organisations stand to benefit from designing work environments that decrease workplace envy and increase positive empathy. Managers can do this by creating a common sense of identity among employees, so people feel like they are working for the same company, not against each other.

"There's enough background theory - for example, the broaden-and-build theory - to suggest that when you experience positive emotions, you're more likely to look for options, learn from other people and be creative and innovative. All those things are related to positive, not negative, emotions."

In Associate Professor Ganegoda's view, organisations will need more positive empathy to boost collaboration and creativity as they seek new solutions to new problems to survive rapid change. And the more that creative teams come to dominate the workplace, the more organisations need to review their old workplace practices, structures and incentive systems.

The next stage of her research will be to undertake a qualitative study, in which she will ask people to provide examples of when they have felt happy for a colleague in the workplace.

"We want to understand how positive empathy actually emerges in organisations and in what situations people feel happy toward their co-workers' happiness. We're trying to develop an empirically validated scale to measure it, because if you can't measure it, you can't really manage it," she says.

"Once we have a measure, then the possibilities are endless. We could see how it then affects certain outcomes like performance and profits, and maybe even the extent to which sports teams win games. We can examine how positive empathy predicts important organisational outcomes if we can develop the measure."

In the next stage of research, employees from a range of organisations across five main industries will be surveyed to gain broad data that can be generalised to create a useful measure of positive empathy. The industries include finance, education and mining.

The data collected so far from participants in Australia and the United States are yielding promising results, which largely support the theoretical propositions on the topic. The research team is currently in the process of designing a series of more complex studies to replicate and extend these initial findings.

In a world that is changing from the traditional practice of competition between organisations and individuals - where envy is the default response - to one of collaboration and cooperation, Associate Professor Ganegoda's research is likely to have increasing relevance.

"I want to help organisations understand how they can use positive empathy to improve workplace relations and incentivise performance without unleashing the destructive power of envy," she says.

> **When you experience positive emotions, you're more likely to look for options, learn from other people and be creative and innovative.**

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Ian Gray is a former journalist, with experience at ABC Radio and Bloomberg, who has been writing about the achievements of Melbourne Business School's faculty, students and alumni for the past five years as a member of the MBS Communications Team.

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