GOOD COP/BAD COP SUPERVISORS REDUCE EMPLOYEE PRODUCTIVITY

FAYETTEVILLE, Ark. – Supervisors who direct both positive support and negative behaviors toward an employee cause more damage than if they were always negative. University of Arkansas researcher Dan Ganster has found that negative interactions, called social undermining, not only counteract positive measures, but they can reduce productivity and destroy relationships.

"The negative effects are strong if a supervisor is undermining a subordinate, but the undermining is even more damaging if the supervisor is also a source of strong support," explained Ganster. "Undermining behaviors may be perceived as even more threatening to the employee because they signal a potential loss of support from the supervisor."

Ganster conducted his research on social undermining with former U of A graduate student Michelle Duffy, now with the University of Kentucky, and Milan Pagon, dean of the College of Police and Security Studies at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. It appears in the current issue of the Academy of Management Journal.

"Interpersonal relationships are critical elements in an organization," explained Ganster, chair of the department of management in the Sam M. Walton College of Business. "A lot of research has been conducted on positive aspects, but surprisingly little on these negative interactions in the workplace."
Social undermining can either be behaviors that indicate a negative attitude, such as anger or dislike; criticism of the target’s actions; and/or efforts and/or actions that hinder the target’s attainment of goals. The behaviors can be insidious, but they must be perceived as intentional by the target. They can be verbal or physical and either direct, such as saying something derogatory about a person, or indirect, such as failing to defend someone.

"Social undermining is an intentional action on the part of a supervisor or coworker that causes the target to experience distress and some reservation about the relationship itself," Ganster explained. "It relates directly to employee attitudes, behaviors and well-being."

The study was conducted with 685 participants from the national police force in the Republic of Slovenia. Subjects were assured that their responses were confidential and participation was voluntary. Their ages ranged from 18 to 55, 93 percent were male and they averaged 4 years in their current position.

"Police work entails a high level of social interaction in a setting that creates a great potential for forming both strong social bonds as well as negative relationships," Ganster said. "That makes it an ideal environment for examining the dynamics of social undermining and support."

The researchers looked at four specific outcomes related to being the target of social undermining: self-efficacy, organizational commitment, somatic health complaints and counterproductive work behaviors. Self-efficacy refers to a person’s belief that they can meet the demands of the situation. Somatic health complaints are commonly associated with depression and can include any number of physical ailments ranging from sleep disturbance to pain and fatigue. Examples of counterproductive work behaviors include theft, workplace sabotage and unnecessary absences.

As expected, social undermining by supervisors and coworkers showed significant associations for somatic complaints, self-efficacy and counterproductive variables. The size of the effect was greater for social undermining than for social support. When the source of social undermining is a supervisor, the results were more consistent than if the undermining was done by a coworker.

While supervisor undermining did not affect organizational commitment, it had a negative effect on self-efficacy, somatic health complaints and counterproductive behaviors. The researchers were surprised to find that supervisor support made supervisor undermining more damaging, rather than countenacting the effects of social undermining by coworkers.
When faced with a supervisor that provides both social support and social undermining, employees may cope with uncertainty in the relationship by becoming more vigilant and monitoring the relationship more closely so that they can respond. However, this vigilance may result in employees noticing higher levels of both undermining and support. Use of vigilance as a coping mechanism may actually make the original problem worse, according to Ganster.

"Disregarding either the positive or negative aspects skews our perception of the role work relationships play in important organizational outcomes," Ganster explained. "This obstructs our ability to develop an accurate understanding of social relationships and interactions."