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## **Managerial Integrity: Are Black Employees More Sensitive to Behavioral Breaches?**

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# R E S E A R C H   B R I E F S

## Managerial Integrity: Are Black Employees More Sensitive to Behavioral Breaches?

*Research Brief by Clive Muir, Associate Professor of Business Administration, Winston-Salem State University*

Some time ago, a friend sought my advice about a problem at her company. She had been given a long-awaited promotion a few months earlier, but it was a temporary assignment. Her unit manager was reassuring at the time, saying that he was “looking out” for her and would recommend her for a permanent managerial position. Yet now, my friend explained, the unit manager had moved to another division and his replacement had reorganized the unit. In the process, she lost her temporary promotion and had to return to her former position. Distraught, she planned to quit because management had broken their promise. I suggested that she shouldn’t quit. While I agreed with her that things seemed unfair, I explained that perhaps there were reasons why events had transpired as they did. She listened quietly as I spoke and when I was finished calmly said, “Well, I understand all that you’re saying, but I just know that you can’t trust what these managers say.”

This real-life scenario, and more specifically my friend’s mistrust of management, is something that Tony Simons (Cornell University), Ray Friedman (Vanderbilt University), Leigh Anne Liu (Georgia State University), and Judi McLean Parks (Washington University) speak to in their recent study. They investigated the sensitivity of employees to the “behavioral integrity” of their managers. In doing so, they found that black employees were more sensitive to the behavioral integrity of managers than any other subgroup in the workplace. Simons and his colleagues have produced a fasci-

nating piece of research, one that may help explain the reactions of my friend, who is black.

The concept of behavioral integrity focuses on the perceived alignment between what someone says and what that person does. Of course, employees often pay close attention to how well the values, principles, and promises expressed by managers, orally and in writing, match their actions. For example, a company that promotes its commitment to a cause (e.g., diversity, customer service, gender equality, etc.) yet behaves in ways that undermine those commitments has a behavioral integrity gap. And a supervisor who promises to create fair work schedules but fails to make good on those promises may be seen as lacking behavioral integrity. There’s no doubt that the average employee could easily identify and even tolerate instances where managers compromised their behavioral integrity. However, what the work of Simons and his colleagues tells us is that sensitivity to behavioral integrity differs among groups of employees.

Simons and his colleagues surveyed nearly 2,000 employees at more than 100 hotels in Canada and the United States. The surveys asked employees to rate their managers’ behavioral integrity as well as their level of trust in them. To measure behavioral integrity, employees were asked to rate the match between managers’ words and actions, including whether managers delivered on promises and practiced what they preached. To measure trust in management, employees were asked if they were willing to let their manager have complete control over their future in the company and whether they felt good about letting the manager make decisions that seriously affected their lives.

The results were quite interesting. First, black employees more easily perceived gaps in behavioral integrity than other groups of employees. Moreover, when they felt managers were lacking in behavioral integrity, there were “broad . . . and

deep consequences” for black employees. For instance, black employees who felt their managers had lower behavioral integrity were more likely to express lower levels of trust in their managers. This had a domino effect in that black employees expressed less satisfaction with the manager’s performance, with their own jobs, and with the company. Consequently, black employees felt less committed to the company and were more likely to want to leave.

An unexpected finding in the study was that black employees did not view black managers as having more behavioral integrity than white managers. In fact, the black employees were more critical of black managers, who they probably felt “should know better.” More research is needed on the relationship between black managers and black employees. To the question of how the integrity breaches of top management might trickle down to middle and lower-level managers, Simons and his colleagues found that both black and non-black employees were sensitive to those breaches. That leaves one to conclude that black employees’ greater sensitivity to integrity breaches is more discernible at lower, more direct levels of supervision.

But why give special attention to black employees in the first place? Simons and his colleagues argue that race is an amplifier of gaps in behavioral integrity because of the distinct and difficult history of black life in North America. And ongoing (and often widely publicized) instances of offensive and derogatory treatment means that blacks continue to be vigilant about managerial and organizational integrity.

Yet there is an irony to black employees’ greater sensitivity to breaches in behavioral integrity. Simons and his colleagues contend that more than any other group, black employees depend on their managers and on formal channels of communication for most of their information about company affairs, opportunities, and activities that might affect their performance and status in the company. In effect, this is the case because black employees—more than their non-black counterparts—are more likely to be excluded from (or simply not included in) the informal networks where real decisions are made and sense is made of

company policies. Consequently, when black employees respond to perceived integrity gaps by becoming disaffected with their managers, they may be cutting off their own access to success.

Simons and his colleagues warn that their findings should not be used to justify or continue discriminatory practices in hiring black employees (e.g., judging them as “too sensitive” or “special challenges” to corporate culture). Instead, they suggest that heightened sensitivities to behavioral integrity may be positive in that they provide managers with early warnings before such breaches become liabilities to the company.

Another consideration for managers is that although black employees may be more likely to be affected by breaches in behavioral integrity, all employees are ultimately affected. It is therefore up to organizations and their managers to properly use the critical diagnostic resource provided by black employees to close the gaps in behavioral integrity, with an eye toward improving quality and consistency, creating optimal working conditions, and enhancing the goodwill and the bottom line of the company.

*Source:* Simons, T., Friedman, R., Liu, L. A., & McLean Parks, J. (2007). Racial differences in sensitivity to behavioral integrity: Attitudinal consequences, in-group effects, and “trickle down” among Black and non-Black employees. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 92(3), 650–665.

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## Knowing When to Quit: Do Optimism and Overconfidence Cloud Inventor Judgment?

*Research Brief by Clive Muir, Associate Professor of Business Administration, Winston-Salem State University*

The word “inventor” conjures up the image of a bespectacled, solitary figure, usually an older man, toiling in a laboratory surrounded by his strange contraptions. He is left to his own devices, literally, and the occasional display of weird behavior is expected and tolerated. Indeed, many of

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