UNIVERSITY OF IOWA EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING SURVEY:

Supplemental Report on Remote Supervision
(May-June 2020)

In the well-being survey conducted among 6,297 University of Iowa employees in May-June 2020, we asked a number of questions that are important for managers and supervisors navigating the global COVID-19 pandemic. Below we summarize our findings around family-supportive supervisor behaviors and remote supervision.

Family Supportive Supervisor Behavior (FSSB)

Family Supportive Supervisor Behaviors (FSSB) was assessed by the average of three items (sample item: your supervisor makes you feel comfortable talking to him/her about your conflicts between work and non-work).

Family Supportive Supervisor Behavior Scale[1]
Your supervisor…
…makes you feel comfortable talking to him/her about your conflicts between work and non-work.
…demonstrates effective behaviors in how to juggle work and non-work issues.
…works effectively with employees to creatively solve conflicts between work and non-work.

(1-5 scale; strongly agree to strongly disagree)

FSSB was the most consistently significant factor across employee reports of overall well-being, professional fulfillment, emotional exhaustion, and a scale assessing the emotional states of depression, anxiety, and stress. This was the case for all workers, across work types (remote, onsite, and clinical). Employees who reported that their supervisors role modeled how to juggle work and family issues, listened to their work-nonwork conflicts, and worked with their employees to creatively solve them, reported higher well-being and lower emotional exhaustion.

Onsite clinical workers were significantly less likely to report that their supervisors exhibited family-supportive behaviors than remote workers and onsite non-clinical workers. Remote workers were the most likely to report that their supervisors were supportive. Patterns of relationships among well-being outcomes and FSSB by work types suggest that family supportive supervisor behaviors were most important for onsite non-clinical workers, and somewhat less critical for predicting the well-being of remote workers.

Remote supervision

In all, 806 employees in our sample reported that they were managing remote workers; 78% of those remote supervisors were also working remotely. Generally, remote supervisors fared better on well-being outcomes than their counterparts who were not managing remote employees.

We probed specific predictors of well-being among remote supervisors using multiple regression. We looked at supervisor self-efficacy/confidence in managing workers remotely and their empowering leadership with their remote employees. Below are the items used to assess each issue, respectively.

Self-efficacy items[2]
How much do you agree with each statement?
I am confident in my ability to manage my employees remotely.
I can effectively deliver feedback when my employees aren't physically present at work.
I am able to effectively use email to check in with my employees.
I am able to set expectations appropriately for my remote work employees.
I am able to assess my employee's performance based on the results they achieve, rather than how they spend their time.
I feel confident in my ability to set appropriate goals for my remote work employees.

(1-5 scale; strongly disagree to strongly agree)

Empowering leadership items[3]
With my remote workers, I:
Lead by example.
Listen to their ideas and suggestions.
Provide help to work group members.
Explain rules and expectations to them.
Treat them as equals.

(1-5 scale; strongly disagree to strongly agree)

Worse emotional states (of depression, anxiety, and stress) and lower overall well-being among these supervisors was particularly associated with a lack of self-efficacy to perform their duties remotely and less associated with their leadership skills. Both self-efficacy and empowering leadership independently contributed to affect supervisor emotional exhaustion and professional fulfillment.

Approximately 70% of the remote supervisors were women (N=603). We found different results for male and female supervisors, such that female supervisors reported significantly higher self-efficacy (M_{fem} = 4.13; M_{male} = 3.94) and higher levels of empowering leadership behaviors (M_{fem} = 4.43; M_{male} = 4.31). In general, self-efficacy for remote supervision was a stronger contributor to well-being outcomes for female supervisors than for male supervisors. Alternatively, perceptions of being an empowering leader had stronger effects for male supervisors than female supervisors, particularly in terms of reducing supervisor-reported emotional states (depression, anxiety, and stress) and increasing their professional fulfillment.

Conclusions

Leadership is critical during a crisis. Employees whose supervisors enact family supportive supervision behaviors report lower stress and higher well-being. Likewise, remote supervisors who are confident and empowering also report higher well-being outcomes. It is unclear whether supervisors who are less stressed are more confident supervisors, or whether self-efficacy leads to greater well-being/less stress, but the association is clear. Training focused on the behaviors captured in this survey could serve to buffer some of the stress that supervisors and employees experience.

References

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