

The Upside of Playing Favorites

Haoying (Howie) Xu, Jingzhou Pan, & Xiaotong (Janey) Zheng

Playing favorites gets a [bad rap](#) — but is it always destructive? Certainly, managers should generally avoid unfair, demotivating practices such as giving preferable assignments, promotions, or other rewards to employees whom they like better rather than according to equitable metrics. But [our new research](#) suggests that when managed correctly, our natural tendencies both to pick favorites and to want to be picked can be harnessed for good.

To explore what happens on a team when the boss plays favorites, we conducted two studies with more than 500 full-time employees from China, the United States, and the United Kingdom. We used both survey responses and experimental data to look at how people react when they feel that their boss has a closer relationship to a peer than to them, in terms of both emotional and behavioral responses. Across our studies, we found that in some cases, employees would react negatively when they witnessed their boss demonstrating favoritism, leading them to undermine the coworker who seemed to have a better relationship with the boss (i.e., the “boss’s favorite”). But in other cases, employees would actually react positively, reporting increased motivation to learn from the boss’s favorite and improve themselves.

What drove these different reactions? While the manner in which the boss plays favorites can make a [big difference](#), we found that the way in which the boss’s favorite expresses themselves — and specifically, whether they are perceived as expressing [authentic pride or hubristic pride](#) — matters just as much. When someone expresses authentic pride, they attribute their achievements to the specific work and effort they have undertaken in pursuit of those goals; i.e., “*I have a strong relationship with my boss because I worked very hard.*” Conversely, when someone expresses hubristic pride, they attribute their achievements to their own intrinsic qualities; i.e., “*I have a strong relationship with my boss because I am always talented when it comes to interacting with leaders.*”

Our research showed that when employees perceive the boss’s favorite as demonstrating hubristic pride, they are more likely to feel what psychologists call [malicious envy](#). This leads them to engage in destructive behaviors, such as insulting the boss’s favorite, spreading harmful rumors about them, or giving them incorrect or misleading information that impedes their ability to do their job. But when employees perceive the boss’s favorite as demonstrating authentic pride, they are more likely to feel *benign envy*, leading them to engage in constructive behaviors such as passively learning or even explicitly seeking advice from their coworker to improve their own relationship with the boss.

So, what does it take to push yourself, your coworkers, or your reports toward this more-productive benign envy response? For employees who don’t have the strongest relationship with their boss, it’s all about building the right mindset. Some amount of envy is only natural, but with [proactive effort](#) to build self-confidence and strengthen your relationship with the coworker who seems to be the boss’s favorite, you can shift from viewing them as a threat to seeing them as a resource for self-improvement. Once you’ve embraced this attitude, you can begin observing

the boss's favorite to better understand what they do well, proactively seek their advice, and work to replicate their success, ultimately helping you improve your relationship with both your peers and your boss.

At the same time, our research also highlighted the impact of how the boss's favorite expresses themselves on coworkers' reactions. If you know that you have a particularly strong relationship with your boss, it's perfectly fine to feel good about it — but make sure you're expressing pride in a way that is authentic, rather than hubristic. This means recognizing your own achievements without exaggerating them, reflecting on the effort it took to build your relationship with your boss, and remembering that having a great relationship with your boss doesn't make you superior to your coworkers in other areas. In addition, if you've been successful in building a positive relationship with your manager, don't keep what you've learned to yourself. Instead, be generous in sharing your experience if and when your coworkers ask you for advice.

Of course, there's only so much an individual employee can do. Despite the effects we identified in our research, the lion's share of responsibility for ensuring positive, productive workplace dynamics falls on the manager and the organization.

As a manager, it's critical both to acknowledge that there's no avoiding some amount of variation in your relationships with your different reports, and to work to ensure that you're still doing your best to build those relationships fairly and equitably. While favoritism of any sort has the potential to be frustrating to those who feel left out, employees are likely to react a lot better if they can see that you've built the strongest relationships with top performers, rather than simply with people you seem to like better. In addition, while it's natural to have different relationships with different employees, managers should work to cultivate compassion and empathy even for the employees who aren't their favorites. Managers should also foster a culture of humility, both by modeling humble behavior themselves and by encouraging humility on their team. This can help everyone interact more productively, and it can particularly inspire the "favorites" to emulate their boss's humility, ultimately leading them to express less hubristic pride and thus reduce the negative impact of favoritism in the workplace.

Finally, at an organizational level, senior leadership should prioritize investment in programs and policies that will improve relationship dynamics. Managers should have access to regular or special training sessions on building relationships, in which the role of favoritism is acknowledged openly and [healthy strategies](#) for managing it are discussed. All employees will also benefit from trainings related to [emotional intelligence](#), in particular with regard to expressing authentic rather than hubristic pride and managing envy. For example, Google's emotional intelligence training program has been [widely lauded](#) as an effective tool to boost self-awareness, self-regulation, and other critical emotional skills.

Playing favorites can sometimes be extremely harmful — but our research shows that it doesn't have to be. With the right approach, employees, managers, and leaders can build an organizational culture that celebrates positive workplace relationships and gives everyone the tools they need to grow and succeed.

Haoying (Howie) Xu is an incoming assistant professor of management in the School of Business at Stevens Institute of Technology (starting September 2022). He received his Ph.D. from the University of Illinois Chicago. His research is focused on leadership, workplace relationships, and workplace emotions.

Jingzhou Pan is an associate professor of organizational behavior and human resource management in the College of Management and Economics at Tianjin University (China). His research interests include leadership, creativity and innovation, career management, and interpersonal relationships.

Xiaotong (Janey) Zheng is an assistant professor of leadership at Durham University Business School. Her research interests are in the areas of social exchange processes between leaders and followers, employees' identity dynamics, and mentoring.