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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 52: DAVID LONG – IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT AT WORK

Ken White

From the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business. The weekly podcast brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that can make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host Ken White. Thanks for listening. Ingratiation establishing oneself in the favor or good graces of someone, especially by deliberate effort. When we change jobs and join a new company or organization, ingratiation plays a significant role in how we create relationships with our new colleagues and superiors. In many cases, it goes beyond that and moves into office politics. How new employees build relationships through ingratiation and impression management and how that affects leaders is the topic of new research by Professor David Long of the College of William & Mary's Mason School of Business and his colleague Trevor Foulk of the University of Florida. Their research will be published in The Journal of Psychology later this year. Long, who teaches organizational behavior, completed a series of studies on ingratiation at work. He joins us today on the podcast to talk about new employees, kissing up, and how it affects the rest of the team. Here's our conversation with Professor David Long.

Ken White

David, thanks for taking the time to talk about your research. It's great to have you here. Thanks for being here.

David Long

Thanks for having me, Ken.

Ken White

So you've done some recent research on impression management. Tell us about the specific research piece you did.

David Long

So impression management is almost self-describing, but it's the behaviors that we employ in the workplace to control or at least try and control how others perceive and

evaluate us. And for instance, if you want to be liked. Well, there's some things that you can do to be liked. You can compliment someone. You can praise them. You can even do them a favor. Let me grab you a cup of coffee. And what research shows is that when you do things like that, the person reciprocates by liking you more. If I want to self-promote and be seen as more competent, I may volunteer to work overtime or come in on the weekend or pick up an extra assignment or two again to try to prove my competence to others.

Ken White

Are we, as people in an organizational setting, doing this purposely? Is it sort of subconsciously? Where does it fit?

David Long

Both typically, it arguably is the most pervasive social phenomenon that exists in and out of the workplace. We're always trying to control how others view us, and we're always passing judgments on others. So yes, it's both. We're doing it subconsciously all the time. We purposefully don't belt. We don't realize it, but we don't, for instance, burp when we're around others because we don't want them to think poorly of us, but at times we do say, okay, this is an important moment where I need to make the right impression. Like a job interview. And so you switch from subconscious to conscious, and you're very deliberate about what you say or do again to control how you're perceived.

Ken White

One of my favorite cartoons is in Harvard Business Review, and there's a Millennial in the interview chair. And then there's a baby boomer doing the interviewing, and the baby boomer says if you take one more selfie, this interview's over.

David Long

Exactly. And so the millennial not recognizing how they're being perceived. The interviewer is saying I'm judging you. Exactly what you're doing.

Ken White

So tell us about your study. What did you do?

David Long

So I was my colleague and I were really interested in when you're new to your organization, you are desperate to try to form an impression of your boss because think about your boss. Your boss controls your destiny. Your boss dictates how much you're going to make. Are you going to get promoted? What are your job responsibilities and job duties going to be? So this is an important person. And when you're new, you really

want to figure out if that is someone who you can trust because your fate is in their hands. So what we know is that the quick and easy way to form an impression of someone is just observe them or interact with them, and that's what we call a direct way to form an impression. So I may observe how you act towards me, what you're wearing, things you're saying again, and I'm as you're doing these things, I'm forming an impression, and a newcomer again is very hungry to kind of fill that bucket to say who is this person. Can I trust them? Is this somebody who is good?

Ken White

Yeah.

David Long

The problem is when you're new, a lot of times, you don't get that direct face-to-face interaction with a supervisor. You have to rely on other social cues. Well, because, as we know, ingratiation, which is a form of impression management where people are trying to be liked, is so common in the workplace. As a newcomer, it just so might be that when you observe your co-workers interacting around the supervisor and the boss, you might just actually see them ingratiate that person. So instead of making a direct observation of the boss, you now or watching someone else interact directly with the boss, and that's an indirect way to form an impression. Well, we don't know how a newcomer will interpret that interaction. What will that interaction do in shaping their evaluation of their new supervisor, or even will it shape it? So that was our ultimate research question.

Ken White

Interesting. So how did you go about you had an experiment, really?

David Long

We did several. We ran several experiments, which is pretty typical in experimental research. What we wanted to find out is A does the phenomenon even exist if a participant acting the role of a new employee observes this type of interaction where a co-worker who is in the organization ingratiates the supervisor. Does it impact their evaluation of the supervisor, and how. So we did a series of studies with students, with full-time workers, where we had them watch videos and in the video. And again, as a newcomer, you really wouldn't have much background knowledge of your co-workers or your supervisor, so when you watch a video of alleged co-worker interacting with your new supervisor, it's kind of like it's what we call realism. It has the realism of being new to an organization. And so the co-worker would ingratiate the supervisor, hey, can I get you a coffee? I really like what you said at that meeting the other day. I thought it was excellent. You're so smart. You know, it seems like everything that you bring to the table is always a win. You know some of the typical overtures that you may hear in the workplace. And then, we ask the participant what do you think of the supervisor based on that interaction.

Well, two schools of thought about how this may turn out. On the one hand, a lot of people think when they a lot of observers of impression management find it unsavory because it's manipulation. When they see somebody purposefully trying to elicit attributions and shape how they're perceived, they see it as maybe slightly deceitful. Again it's manipulation, and so to them, it's unsavory and unsettling. However, we don't really know how they will judge the targets of that behavior. We know how they will judge the person performing the behaviors what we call the actor. But again, the target that we don't really know. So we could see that it might that unsavory impression may transfer to the target or because this person is spending so much time trying to impress their boss. That might signal something more positive, like, wow, this is somebody who really is worth someone's attention and effort. So what we speculated and found is that when a newcomer sees their boss their supervisor being ingratiated by a co-worker, they actually think more favorably of them. They like them better.

Ken White

Huh. Is that just on an engagement? Are they making assumptions? I guess is my question.

David Long

Yeah absolutely. So the way that we measured liking when we call it warmth is through adjectives like is this person nice? Is this someone you trust? Is this someone you like? Is this someone that you think positively of? And when they were the target of ingratiation, they were saying yes, they were, and what that tells us is that they trust that person. They see them not only as likable, but as somebody who is warm and that they can be comfortable that is somebody who is a good person to work for. So it's a little bit of a paradox. They think more negatively of the ingratiator and more positively of the ingratiated.

Ken White

Interesting.

David Long

A really unique finding.

Ken White

Yeah.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with David Long in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education can help you get to the

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Ken White

This has an incredible impact on a leader.

David Long

Well, so I completely agree with you, and one of the things that we surmised based on the findings is that most leaders know one thing and that it's important how I'm perceived by the people who work for me. I really want to make a good impression on these. I want to be the type of leader that I want to be. I want to be trusted. I want to be seen as competent. And so it's important that I communicate that image in the right way. What the new finding, of course, is it's not always what you do, but it's what others do around you and toward you, that can communicate that message.

Ken White

Wow.

David Long

So it's important to observe how others are interacting with you and to recognize that this interaction is actually helping me shape my own reputation and image. And so I need to be cognizant of that. Are people how are people treating me, and what are they doing to me? Because it's an important message that's being communicated.

Ken White

And it could negatively affect a leader. An interaction such as the one you explained.

David Long

Absolutely absolutely. We even changed the experiments a little bit because, again, we wanted to make sure that our data wasn't there wasn't some alternative explanation for our findings. So we did a couple of different experiments just to confirm that our findings were pretty sound. For instance, we gave in another experiment in another study. We gave some of the newcomers some background information, and we said things like this is somebody who you have heard. This boss is somebody who you've heard is a good boss,

and we gave another group some information that said this is a boss that you've heard is not a very good boss. So we almost prime them with some positive and negative information, and we wanted to see if that priming with an override the social cues they gained from the information, and it didn't. Even when they were primed with either positive or negative information, they still formed a more positive impression of the ingratiated boss. So it was the ingratiation that was driving the impression.

Ken White

So any recommendations from your research for that newcomer who is and they're observing, and they're watching relationships people interact with the boss? What should they keep in mind?

David Long

Okay, well, two things. If I'm the newcomer, my recommendation would be do two things. When you're forming, an impression of somebody is important as a supervisor. Observe social cues that are indirect, like how the co-workers interacting with the boss but also find time to directly interact with the boss because what you don't want to do is base your because first impressions are lasting. Don't solely base first impressions on what others are doing because it may just be that you are observing a lot of people who are willing to say yes to a boss. Who just want to go with the flow and please the supervisor. Go talk to that person directly to form a more holistic impression.

Ken White

Which can be difficult to do as a newcomer, especially if you're young.

David Long

As a newcomer or then be aware that your first impression may be based solely on indirect information and maybe hold off on me on kind of making that concrete dry. Just say okay. He seems like a good person. She seems like a great supervisor. Let me just wait a little longer before I really may form this lasting impression.

Ken White

Yeah, and any recommendations for the leaders?

David Long

Absolutely so as a leader, just be wary of what others are doing around you. We ran one additional study because your question about anything for the leaders we really wanted to address, and so in the second study, we had the leaders then react to the ingratiation. We had some leaders like it by saying I really like you and other leaders kind of be a little colder to the ingratiation.

Ken White

Wow, interesting.

David Long

And we wanted to say, okay, what happens here, and what we found is that leaders, by being positive and affirming and receptive to ingratiation, can also elicit a positive impression from the newcomer. Leaders who are more standoffish and cold. They also elicit a more positive impression. So the key takeaway there is that ingratiation from a co-worker can help a supervisor look good, but the supervisor also can control his or her own destiny by how they perform. If they show liking, then they can still be seen as a good supervisor.

Ken White

Wow, very interesting. Your field is, as we call it OB, organizational behavior. For those who don't have an MBA because that's really where you hear that term and run into researchers and scholars, and teachers. What is OB?

David Long

OB is it's a field where we study human performance in the workplace, and there's a couple of anecdotes that really, I think, hammer home what it is. The two most important outcomes or things topics that we study are job performance and organizational commitment. We are consistently trying to find ways to improve employees' job performance and their loyalty to their organization because job performance drives productivity and organizational commitment drives turnover. And if you can increase productivity and reduce turnover, that's a recipe for success for an organization.

Ken White

Yeah.

David Long

So prior to academia, I worked in retail. I worked for home depot.

Ken White

Right.

David Long

And I was a newly minted store manager. I was running a big box, and my trusty old district manager first day that I was a new store manager, came into my store to walk me, the proverbial walk, which is you do a walk around the store with the district manager. So I prepared hard for this. Knew it was coming. District manager shows up in the store. Dave,

let's go for a walk. So we're walking around the store, and we're looking at hardware. We're looking in garden. We're looking in lumber, and he stops me about halfway through the walk, and he goes okay, what's the most important thing inside the store? And I was like, okay, I got this. I was like, well, I know in the springtime it's garden because we sell so many bags of mulch and lawnmowers and fertilizer and garden hoses. At Christmas time hardware, everybody's buying power tools and saws. But maybe that's not it. But oh, wait a minute, lumber and building materials. That's year-round. I know it's low margin and a commodity, but the contractors come in and buy truckloads and truckloads of sticks and concrete. I'm like, okay, it's going to be one of these, and I want to make sure I get it right. So I'm what I'm talking aloud and articulated all this. And he's just got this huge grin on his face, and he goes you're way off.

Ken White

Yeah.

David Long

And I go what and he goes most important thing inside the store is your people. He goes let me tell you something, as a store manager, if you can figure out how to make the people in here happy and satisfied with their job, they're going to sell garden stuff in the spring. They're gonna sell power tools at Christmas time, and they're gonna sell lumber and building materials to the contractors. They will do that stuff for you. You take care of them, and they'll take care of the rest. And I was just like, oh my goodness.

Ken White

There it is.

David Long

And so that's it. This is the people side of business.

Ken White

Very interesting. Research-wise, what's up next for you? Is there something you'd like to kind of focus on? An area you'd like to look at?

David Long

Yeah, absolutely. I'm going to keep parsing back the impression management side.

Ken White

Sure.

David Long

Impression management is synonymous with things like political skill or politics and reputation, branding, and those are all really important for leaders to make sure that their reputation is not only the right one but it's sound and intact. I'm doing some recent work on authenticity, informing, and impressions. So what I have found, at least my preliminary findings, are that impressions that are perceived as genuine and authentic are longer lasting than ones that are a little, maybe less authentic or genuine. So if you can form, if you can build the right impression, and you can do so in a way that people perceive as genuine, it's rock solid.

Ken White

That's our conversation with David Long, and that's our podcast for this week. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education can help you, and your organization get to the next level with a business in leadership development program that specifically fits your needs. If you're interested in learning more about the opportunities at the Center for Corporate Education for you or your organization, visit our website at wmleadership.com or go to the William & Mary site, click on the Mason School of Business and then go to corporate education. Thanks to our guest this week David Long and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White. Until next time have a safe, happy, and productive week.