

Kellogg Insight Podcast Transcript: Revenge of the Customer Service Rep

Jessica LOVE: Whenever she's talking to a customer service representative, Cynthia Wang tries her best to be nice. But every now and then, she can't help but think that the employee is trying to punish her for something.

Cynthia WANG: You know, when you're waiting on a phone call and you're talking to an airline or something and it's taking forever. And sometimes you wonder, "Are they doing that on purpose?"

LOVE: Wang is a clinical professor of management and organizations at Kellogg. And recently, she's been studying sabotage. Because...

WANG: Well, who is not interested in sabotage?

LOVE: Now, to be clear, employee sabotage isn't necessarily something as dramatic as, say, spitting in a customer's food. More often than not, it's smaller things: Maybe keeping someone on hold too long, or just doing a worse job than usual for a particular client. But as minor as these things may seem, they can creep into a company's entire culture. So Wang had an important question.

WANG: "Hey, if you are a customer service person and a customer mistreats you, why do you choose to sabotage those customers?" Which is I think something that happens, sadly, quite a bit.

[musical interlude]

LOVE: Welcome to the *Kellogg Insight* podcast. I'm your host, Jessica Love. Employees in all kinds of industries have to deal with unpleasant customers. Waiters get mistreated. Call center operators get screamed at. Salespeople have to smile at difficult clients. But why do those tense moments sometimes escalate to actual sabotage? That's what Cynthia Wang and her coauthors wanted to find out in a recent study. Today on the podcast, Wang explains the emotional chain reaction that leads to sabotaging customers. The good news? There's a way companies can help keep their employees from turning on their customers.

Producer Jake Smith has the story.

Jake SMITH: The first thing the researchers wanted to do was figure out why workers turn to sabotage when they're mistreated. Specifically, they wanted to test a prominent theory among psychologists. This theory says that sabotage happens in three steps: hostility, then dehumanization, and finally, sabotage.

WANG: So what happens is, let's say you mistreat me, you're the customer. You start yelling at me and berating me. It activates these feelings of hostility. That automatically very quickly leads me to say, "I think of you more as a worm or less human," things like that. And that, in turn, actually sparks the sabotage behavior.

SMITH: But in order to test this theory, the researchers needed a place where customers were especially likely to lash out.

WANG: And so we decided to go into a call center because that's a context in which a lot of people do experience this mistreatment, people that work in these call centers.

SMITH: Wang and her coauthors conducted a survey of workers at a large call center. In the survey, they asked the workers to rank how often they were mistreated by customers, and how hostile they felt toward those customers. Next they asked the workers how much they agreed with statements like, "Some people deserve to be treated like animals," getting at how much they dehumanized customers. And finally, they were asked how often they actually engaged in sabotage, by ignoring customers, giving them the wrong information...

WANG: You know, not fixing certain things when they said that it had been fixed.

SMITH: And what they found was just what they'd suspected: Each step in the sabotage process led right to the next. When people felt more hostile, they were more likely to dehumanize. And when they dehumanized their customers, they became more likely to mistreat them. In other words, sabotage didn't seem to be a carefully planned out thing, so much as an emotional chain reaction that happens in seconds.

WANG: So it's not like we sit there and we're deliberating, and I'm thinking, "How am I gonna respond to you?" This is a very quick process.

[musical interlude]

SMITH: But survey responses are one thing. Actually observing this process in action would be something else entirely. And if their model was right, then the researchers should be able to make people more likely to commit sabotage in the real world. So they went into the lab for an experiment.

WANG: We had participants take part in being an editor, essentially.

SMITH: They recruited people to provide editing services for an imaginary customer—fixing spelling and grammar mistakes, things like that. The participants did their first editing task. And then, a few days later, each participant received one of two very different emails from that customer. One email was totally cordial; it mentioned that they'd made some mistakes, but also thanked them for their work. But the other email...

SMITH: Can I have you just read the full email?

WANG: I would love to read this. So, “I received your edits of my manuscript. As you know, I had to submit the manuscript to my boss the next day. I must say I don’t appreciate your services. After giving the paper to my boss, I looked over it and found several mistakes. You should be embarrassed of your ignorance. Your lack of detail just shows how slow and lazy you are. If you edit my work again, I hope that you won’t be so dumb and that you will catch these mistakes.” Yeah. It’s a little rough. But this is what we see in the real world.

SMITH: If that sounds harsh, it’s because the researchers needed something that would feel real—and, well, kind of hostile. So they worked with the ethics board to get the language just mean enough, but not too mean. Anyway, right after the participants received the email, they were asked to complete another editing task for that same client. The researchers wanted to know if the people who received the nasty email were more likely to intentionally botch the job than people who received the cordial one.

WANG: Basically if people were not catching as many mistakes, doing a shoddier job.

SMITH: Which is exactly what they found. The folks who’d received the rude email missed more mistakes, and also rushed through the editing. And when they surveyed these participants, they found that same process as was happening as at the call center. In two very different settings, the researchers had essentially discovered a trigger that would set off the chain reaction to sabotage.

[musical interlude]

SMITH: But there was one more part to this experiment.

WANG: So we wanted to say, “Hey, is there any way to break these links?”

SMITH: You see, before they completed the editing task, half of the participants had watched a video about ethics in the workplace. The video—which featured a smiling animated panda—talked about honesty and accountability, and offered tips like, “Preserve integrity by following the company’s code of conduct.”

It turned out, participants who watched this video—even the ones who’d gotten the nasty email—were less likely to sabotage the client. And surveys revealed that it was because the video broke the chain reaction in *two* different places.

WANG: You still might actually feel hostile towards the customer. You might be like, “Ugh, this person makes me super angry.” But, you won’t respond to that hostility by devaluing them and thinking of them as lesser a person.

We also find that this link is broken on the latter half, so even if I think that this person doesn’t deserve fair treatment, doesn’t deserve good treatment, if you’re in an ethical climate, this devaluation will not necessarily lead to sabotage behavior. That will break that link. Which is a little counterintuitive. You would think you wouldn’t be able to control these snap judgments. But in a way, even though they emerge, the climate does help you.

SMITH: And to Wang, that's a remarkable thing. Because while a manager can't stop customers from being jerks, the manager *can* make the workplace feel more ethical—that's in their control. And stopping even one act of sabotage can start a chain reaction of its own.

WANG: You know, there can also be spillover effects. If one customer service person starts doing it and the person next to them sees it, it can spill over and really effect once again the ethical climate of the organization. I think it has more far-reaching implications than just the individual interactions.

LOVE: This program was produced by Kevin Bailey, Jessica Love, Fred Schmalz, Jake Smith, Michael Spikes, and Emily Stone. It was written by Jake Smith, and edited by Michael Spikes.

Special thanks to Cynthia Wang.

As a reminder, you can find us on iTunes, Google Play, or our website. If you like this show, please leave us a review or rating. That helps new listeners find us. And visit us at insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu, where you can learn more about ethics in the workplace.

We'll be back in a couple weeks with another episode of the *Kellogg Insight* podcast.