

ILLUminate Blog Transcript: Liuba Belkin on Improving Employers and Government Response to Crises

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- ANNOUNCER: 00:01 [music] This podcast is brought to you by *ILLUminate*, the Lehigh Business blog. To learn more, please visit us at business.lehigh.edu/news. [music]
- JACK CROFT: 00:13 Welcome. I'm Jack Croft, host of the *ILLUminate* Podcast for Lehigh University's College of Business. Today is February 24, 2022. Our guest, Liuba Belkin, has been studying how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected people's lives since the first wave of the pandemic struck in March of 2020. Today, we're talking with Dr. Belkin about two recent studies that shine light on how the federal government and employers, respectively, could improve the way they respond not only to the pandemic, but to future crises as well. Liuba is an associate professor of management in Lehigh's College of Business and holds the Axelrod Family Endowed Fellowship. Her primary research interests focus on affect and emotions in organizational settings, and the role of emotions and negotiations, trust relationships, and managerial practices. She also studies the influence of electronic communication media on employee relationships, decision making, and performance. Thanks for being with us again today, Liuba.
- LIUBA BELKIN: 01:19 Good afternoon, Jack, and it's my pleasure to be here.
- CROFT: 01:24 Since we last talked with you about your research regarding COVID-19, you've published two recent studies I'd like to discuss today. And I think there are some important common threads that run through both of them, but we'll get to that a bit later. I'd like to start with the study published in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* that examines the relationship between individuals' beliefs in the United States government's benevolence toward them and their compliance with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's COVID-19 guidelines. I think there are two main terms used in the study that we should probably define upfront. So let's start with what you mean by government benevolence.
- BELKIN: 02:08 Okay, Jack, so let me start first kind of why we started this particular research. And in this paper, we examined factors that facilitated individual compliance with the CDC guidelines at the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. That was the time when compliance was critical for slowing down the spread of the virus because there was no medication, there was still no vaccines or treatment protocols available. And without public compliance, recovering back to normal could take an extra-long time. At the same time, I also would like to bring this up because it's very relevant to our paper is that the public compliance constituted a type of social dilemma because individual short-term personal interests-- or self-interests, for example, freedom from restrictions, from wearing masks, and doing some other things to be compliant, they were at odds with the collective good slowing down the spread. And since in democratic societies, the national government cannot really enforce compliance by coercion, the only method that the government has to avoid public pushback is to persuade people to comply.
- BELKIN: 03:29 So what are the critical elements or mechanisms that can help in this process? Well, for one, this individual's beliefs about the benevolence of the government. And past research has shown that benevolent intentions are really instrumental to

cooperation. There is research and advice taking that demonstrates that individuals are inclined to take advice from those who they perceive as well intended, to whom they trust. So benevolence represents a fundamental human value, and it's a very important aspect of trustworthiness. It's a part of trust. So this is the extent to which individuals believe that the federal government genuinely cares about citizens' interests. Beliefs in government benevolence are also associated with the ethics of care, and they are particularly important in times of crisis like a pandemic. So in this paper, we expected that individuals who hold stronger beliefs in government's benevolence will be more receptive to CDC guidelines, and because of that, they will also experience a stronger positive affect, which are positive emotions and thus, will be more likely to comply with the CDC guidelines. And we also propose that this positive affect, these positive emotions that people experience will be the mechanism that leads to this compliance based on prior research.

BELKIN: 05:00

Now, going to construal level theory. So this is the theory that explains how individuals mentally represent people, events, and so forth on a continuum level of abstraction. So individuals basically use cognitive schemas to encode and retrieve information once they encounter certain situations either more in abstract or concrete manner. So those with high construal levels tend to focus on long-term or big-picture goals—kind of why, the meaning of actions, as well as moral principles and values. And those that have this tendency for low construal levels, they focus more on short-term goals, small-picture goals—kind of how, the feasibility of actions, as well as more pragmatic concerns that devoid of moral implications. Now, why this is relevant? Because construal levels shape how individuals process information and how they act on this information. So in this paper, we looked at this individual construal level as an important boundary condition, and we expected and found the actual support for this that individuals with high construal levels are more likely to rely on their beliefs in the government's benevolence because high construal level is associated with high-level moral principles, value of benevolence, and also, higher positive factor.

CROFT: 06:33

Now, you conducted the study at the beginning of the very first wave of the pandemic in March and April of 2020. Just briefly, how did you recruit participants and collect the data that you used in the study?

BELKIN: 06:47

So we started the first wave of data collection at the very end of March just when the country was basically closed. Most of the people were doing work in the remote mode, and there was no access to—it would be dangerous to access participants in person. So we recruited online panel, and we had working adults from as many as 40 states in the United States. And for this particular paper, we collected the survey data in two waves. So we had the first wave at the beginning of March and then the second wave sometime in April, and that was a survey study.

CROFT: 07:32

Now, getting to kind of the meat of it here, what were the main findings of the study on the role that government benevolence played in influencing compliance with the COVID guidelines?

BELKIN: 07:44

We found that beliefs in government benevolence did, in fact, play a strong role in public's compliance with the CDC guidelines, but only among individuals with high general construal levels because they have high levels of positive affect. And in

contrast, individuals with low general construal levels, their beliefs in government benevolence were not predictive of their compliance with the CDC guidelines.

CROFT: 08:16

Can you explain a little more about what accounts for that difference?

BELKIN: 08:23

Again, as we predicted, first of all, belief in government benevolence does matter, but unless you activate these beliefs—again, it depends on the information processing. So people with low construal levels, even if they held some beliefs in terms of government benevolence, they believed that the government had their best interest at heart. Because of the low construal levels, they did not act or activate those beliefs, and they were not predictive of compliance. So maybe it would be better understood if we talk about specific implications, right, because we can't really manipulate government benevolence, right? So we just measured that. We didn't manipulate. We couldn't do an experiment because it would be really unethical for us to assign people to a condition when the government is not trustworthy. So we'll literally just measure what existed, what kind of beliefs people had at the time.

CROFT: 09:26

Yeah. And that's actually the next place I was going to go is the practical implications specifically for the federal government and dealing more effectively with crises like the pandemic in the future. What lessons can the government learn from this that could hopefully make things go smoother next time, if there is a next time?

BELKIN: 09:49

Well, or for any type of other type of health crisis because unfortunately, this happens with some regularity. So the main finding is that those beliefs that the public holds is really important for compliance. And the first practical implication would suggest that the federal government should take note and more clearly and hopefully authentically convey benevolence to the public. And they should, again, persuade individuals that they do have the best interests at heart and they consider their welfare. Now, this should not be done just in crisis because it's probably too late. This should be done during so-called normal times. And those beliefs are important because they might also help citizens to stay more attuned to the information conveyed by the government regarding the safety and risk-reduction measures during health crises. And they also might help to reduce perceived threats. So they really might help with the mental burden and well-being of their citizens.

BELKIN: 11:02

Another important message is that-- and it's not just our study. Emerging evidence suggests that cultivating positive affect during crisis is really important, and that's part of the message that the other study we talked about in August also found. So it might seem surprising, but emphasizing positive emotions such as optimism or empathy towards victims, rather than just focusing on threats might be more beneficial and not just for public's mental health, but also for curbing unethical behaviors. So what we see also in upcoming research, studies show that framing public health messages through persuasive language that is associated with kind of higher construals-- so kind of saying the message why and evokes positive affect, it's more efficient than messages that convey threatening information for ensuring public compliance. Also, empathy, another efficient motivator for disease prevention and compliance, and that's other studies that followed up on our show as well. There is research that demonstrates that video and written messages, for example, shared on social media platforms, they can be also strong motivator in compliance because if they portray vulnerable people for personal stories of their own or their beloved ones suffering because of lack of compliance, so evoking empathy and explaining why it's so

important, they really are effective in motivating people to comply in the face of health crisis.

CROFT: 12:49

Moving to the second study, which as I mentioned at the beginning, I think there's some very important common threads between the two of these even though they looked at different sectors, this one was published in the Journal of Business Ethics and it deals with interpersonal relationships between employers and employees and what happens when employees, particularly during a time of crisis such as the pandemic, feel like they're being neglected by their employers. And I think the beginning title of the study kind of sums it up nicely. "You don't care for me. So what's the point for me to care for your business?" Let's start again with defining a couple of terms upfront. The first, "organizational citizenship behaviors." And the second, "relatedness need frustration" that will come up as you talk about the study.

BELKIN: 13:46

So organizational citizenship behaviors, and we shortly call them OCBs, they refer to be the behavior of employees when they're not just doing their jobs, but going above and beyond their expectations, such as putting extra effort and time in their responsibilities or volunteer for extra tasks or helping each other or helping clients, business customers. Such behaviors have been known to help organizations to be more resilient and more responsive to crises. So in other words, when employees engage with those behaviors, there is a high likelihood that the company will be more resilient and hopefully, recover more quickly after crisis. Now, turning to the term relatedness meet frustration, so in social psychology, there is a theory of human motivation called self-determination theory. And this theory posits that individual psychological growth and well-being are dependent on successful satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs. The first need is the human need for autonomy. So having a choice and volition in one's action, and that's a really important need. The second independent basic need is the need for competence. So it's the need for one to feel that they are being responsible for competent performance. They are able to perform competently. And the third, there is a human basic need for belongingness. So this is the human need for connection to others. And the idea is that all of those needs are equally important.

BELKIN: 15:36

This theory has been supported by strong empirical research. It's been decades already, and studies have shown that challenges to these basic needs create negative outcomes for humans for their well-being and their performance and behavior while enhancing those needs does the opposite. In this study, we focused on relatedness needs as particularly important during a crisis like COVID because people were isolated due to measures when the country was closed. A lot of them were isolated in their homes. They couldn't go to work; they had to work remotely. There was a lot of fear and uncertainty, especially during the early stages of the crisis. So satisfaction of individuals' relatedness need, since it can help people flourish, we theorize that when it's not fulfilled or frustrated, it implies relational exclusion, loneliness to people, and it can actually erode individual physical and psychological resources. And specifically, at work, during times like a pandemic, it can lead to suboptimal or maladaptive function, mental and physical, for employees themselves, but also, for the organization.

CROFT: 16:59

Now, in terms of the data that you were looking at, this was also collected through an online survey in that same time period going back to the end of March of 2020, is that correct?

- BELKIN: 17:11 Right. We started also at the end of March, and this study was a part of a very large data collection for separate projects. But this specific data was collected in four waves, not in two. And we finished some time mid-May because we tried to use more measures for this particular paper, and we had to measure them in different waves, one for four during this time.
- CROFT: 17:46 And again, what were the main findings as you looked at the data then?
- BELKIN: 17:51 There were several findings, but one of the reasons, again, that this multi-wave data collection was also important because we were testing a new construct. This “felt neglect” is a new construct. And what we meant by that, we were asking participants to let us know if they feel neglected, forgotten, invisible, overlooked by their employers, and uncared for. It might be surprising in the work context, but it proved to be absolutely not during times of crisis. So there's an important general finding in this paper regarding the experience of felt neglect, that employees expect their leaders to care for them in times of crisis. And lack of this care is detrimental not only to their own well-being-- not only to employee well-being, but it is also detrimental to organizational function. And we found that employees' experience of felt neglect has negative implications, first, on the meaning that people assign to their work. And work meaning is another important construct, that it kind of communicates to employees that their sense of purpose. So if their work is meaningless, they will be less likely to engage in it and do something going above and beyond their responsibilities. And what we found is that indeed, when employees felt neglected, they assigned less meaning to their work, and they were less likely to engage in these organizational citizenship behaviors that could hamper organizational effectiveness during a crisis like COVID-19.
- CROFT: 19:43 So, again, what are some of the practical steps, then, the takeaway lessons that employers can learn from the study to ensure that their employees feel valued instead of neglected when a crisis hits?
- BELKIN: 19:56 Right. The first step is that we think it's important to let employers know that-- to be aware that these are the expectations, things change when people are in crisis mode. So we encourage employers to provide as much attention and care as possible to their employees. And this care does not necessarily have to be complex, time consuming, or resource consuming. It is also based on the comments that our study participants provided us with. It may require only some simple steps. For example, a lot of study participants, they express their just desire for more information and guidance and clear communication. That's why they felt neglected, because their managers did not keep them updated or did not communicate with them consistently enough. So keeping communication channels open, such as sending regular emails with updates, maybe periodic check-ins on a personal level, not just about work, feedback [inaudible], those simple strategies may help mitigate employees' feeling of being neglected, also, showing empathy and concern. And I should, again, underscore it has to be authentic. How can you do that? Just by listening to your employees, their struggles during crisis. Even if you cannot help, just having an ear that can listen to you for 10 minutes when you vent is very important for people because it signals to them that their leaders actually care. And it is understandable that employers might be also concerned with saving the business during this time and kind of spending all their resources on that. We would like to let employers know that spending also time

to their employees, it's not just something that they're doing good for the employees; they're actually helping the organization to function more effectively.

CROFT: 22:00

And this is where I think we kind of get into the common themes between both the government benevolence and the felt-neglect studies. One of the things that strikes me is the clearly important role that communications plays in both cases, whether it's between the government and its citizens or employers and their employees. So if you could talk a bit about how improved communications could improve how we deal with future crises. And it strikes me as you were talking about the situation with employees that sharp change to remote work that you've documented in several of your other studies as well. Certainly, it's understandable how that would lead to potentially feeling like you're being neglected because your supervisor is working hard, trying to keep things going, dealing with a lot of people, and the communication is all by email or phone or Zoom. It's no more seeing someone in a hallway or in a more informal setting. So it takes a conscious effort to send those emails. And when you've got a to-do list that's 100 items long, sometimes those things fall through the cracks. So it strikes me that since remote work is probably almost certainly with us to stay in some form as we move forward, the kinds of things that employers should keep in mind even before there's a crisis.

BELKIN: 23:38

So there are two common threads, I would think, in those two articles. First, it's about ensuring that the public or your employees believe that you have the best interests for them at heart. And again, we did not measure benevolence in our second study that we're talking about today in organizational context. But I guess when you feel neglected, it also translates to this low belief that you really care, right? So whether you're a government leader, organizational leader, you need to signal care and concern for your citizens or your employees. And it is also about clear communication of this concern in your message. And following up on your comment in terms of remote work mode, we always knew before the pandemic hit that based on the research my colleagues and I were also doing on electronic communication that relationships need help in the electronic realm. And when you're in remote mode and when you cannot see your colleagues or talk to your manager, these relationships, to keep them up, you need to again communicate more frequently and clearly. And both studies from different angles, they add to research on the importance of clear and frequent communication especially in the middle of the crisis, which is not surprising. It's not really a novel finding. However, I think there is a new part that we have here with those two studies and other studies we're still in the process of wrapping up is that-- especially for the start of the pandemic, that benevolence and trust really matter. And they matter not just to helping people feel good or for their well-being and mental health, but they also can increase compliance when people encounter this dilemma situations, right, because when they have to choose between their personal interest and give them away a little bit with the collective goal in mind or in organizational context, it's really important for increasing helping behavior of your employees.

BELKIN: 26:01

And as I mentioned earlier, since managers, organizational leaders, they play a critical role in supporting employees in crisis, it's important they are communicating regularly with employees and they have personalized attention. And again, if it's possible at all, when you are in remote work mode, not just communicating about work, but actually, quick check-ins, just, again, to listen to your employees what's going on in their lives, to maintain connection and also show emotional and social support for

employees. This is very critical in dire times such as this pandemic or any types of health or other type of crisis. But on the other hand, employees have to-- employers - I'm sorry - and leaders have to be very sensitive to employee time and also work-life balance goals because we all heard probably of the Zoom fatigue. So kind of overdoing this might lead to surprisingly negative outcomes. So, again, as with any prescription or advice, it has to be common sense kind of balance act. And to wrap up on this, the pandemic has been going for almost two years. And this message about trust and clear communication, I think it remains as relevant as ever. And especially if we look at social context, going back to the first paper we talked about, the way CDC handled their messaging during the last two years, it wasn't always clear. There were many confusions as well in terms of their guidelines, and they cannot be blamed for this entirely, right? There was a lot of uncertainty as well. But I was recently reading the Washington Post article where they quoted Celine Gounder, who is the infectious disease physician who advised Biden administration during the transition. And she also lamented that there is tremendous backlash against people in her profession, and it's very demoralizing. And she also said a kind of I think echoes to what we talked about today is that the trust is lowest-- the public trust to health officials is the lowest at all times now. And public health interventions do not work without trust. And taking this message, I can say the same thing about organizational context. No matter what managers or organizational leaders try to do, their message or their efforts will not work if there is no trust from their employees and if employees feel that they're being neglected or not supported, not taken care of, especially during crisis.

CROFT: 28:55

You've given us an awful lot to think about here, and I think we would all do well to spend some time thinking about the need for more trust and taking perhaps a more benevolent view of one another as well as those we don't know. So thank you so much for being with us again today.

BELKIN: 29:17

Thank you, Jack. It was my pleasure.

CROFT: 29:20

Liuba Belkin's research has been published over the years in such prestigious academic journals as the *Journal of Management*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *Journal of International Business Studies*, and *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*. It also has garnered considerable media attention from such leading business and financial news outlets as *Business Week*, the *Financial Times*, *CNBC*, the *New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Fortune Magazine*, among many others. This podcast is brought to you by *ILLUminate*, the Lehigh Business blog. To hear more podcasts featuring Lehigh Business thought leaders, please visit us at business.lehigh.edu/news. And don't forget to follow us on Twitter @Lehighbusiness. This is Jack Croft, host of the *ILLUminate* podcast. Thanks for listening. [music]