

Jenny Wang – 3MT® Presentation Transcript

Have you ever seen a coworker doing something unethical in the workplace?

What did you do about it?

A third of employees will simply ignore the unethical behavior – but some employees may take this a step further and cover up their coworker's actions.

Cover-up behaviours are actions that try to hide behaviors that you know are wrong, like sweeping something under the rug so no one finds out about it.

Why are these behaviors *so* problematic?

Because they can allow the unethical behavior to continue without anyone finding out!

This might mean that even more people will do *even more* unethical things because they know that they won't get caught.

Current research looks at the effects after the cover-up has already happened, but what we don't yet understand is the process that leads *to* employees covering-up for someone else's unethical behavior.

Using a sample of over 500 real world employees, I conducted a survey to examine why and how employees might cover up their coworker's unethical behavior.

Employees reported seeing behaviors ranging from passing off someone else's work as their own to over-reporting work expenses to racist or sexist speech.

After analyzing the data, what I found is this: Employees who witness their coworker doing unethical things might anticipate that the coworker's behavior can make them look bad if other people find out about it and this can make the employee experience a mix of emotions that include guilt, shame, and embarrassment.

Because they feel this way, they want to protect their reputation and so they cover-up the unethical behavior so that no one else finds out about it.

So now that we know this, how can we prevent employees from covering up unethical behavior?

Ideally, we would like to have organizations where employees speak up when they see something wrong.

Through training, we can help employees recognize that when they feel emotions like guilt, shame, and embarrassment, after seeing a coworker behave unethically, that they can deliberately make the decision to report the behavior, rather than cover it up.

So next time **you** see a coworker doing something you think is wrong, remember what I "uncovered" in my research and don't let those emotions push you to cover-up what you saw. Thank you!