



Employee attitudes to managers

In workplaces, managers have power and authority over workers. How that power is used has been found to impact on employee work behaviours. Good managers can positively influence work performance through generating high levels of trust in their supervisors whereas poor managers obstruct workers from focussing their energy on getting work done and developing their capacities. Positive attitudes to managers enhance organisational citizenship behaviour and commitment to the organisation. Conversely, negative attitudes can lead to reduced commitment, poor performance, absenteeism and turnover (Sashkin and Williams 1990; Whitener 1997; Wayne et al 1997; Huang et al 2010).¹

In order to better understand factors that may influence perceptions about their managers, employees in the *Australia at Work* study² were asked to respond via a five point agree-disagree scale to the following three statements:

'Managers consult employees about issues affecting staff'

'Employees are treated fairly at my workplace'

'Managers at my workplace can be trusted to tell things the way they are'

The vast majority of employees hold quite positive views about these aspects of workplace management, Table 1. However we can also see from Table 1 that employees in managerial roles generally hold more positive views than non-managerial employees. This is consistent with Sashkin and Williams (1990) research that found that managerial employees held more positive views about trust and justice than did their non-managerial colleagues. They found managerial employees tended to focus judgements about fairness on transactional psychological-contract type obligations (e.g. pay and career advancement) while non-managerial employees tended to focus judgements on

¹ Information in this factsheet is an extract from a research paper "Undercover Boss: What Australian employees think about their managers" (forthcoming). The full paper is available from the author, Sally Wright, Workplace Research Centre.

² The *Australia at Work* study is being conducted by the Workplace Research Centre at the University of Sydney. The project is funded by the Australian Research Council's Linkage Grant scheme and the industry partner is Unions NSW. Further financial support is provided by CFMEU Energy & Mining Division, CFMEU ACT Branch, NSW Nurses' Association, the Police Federation of Australia, the SDA, the CEPU, the QLD Nurses Federation and the Nurses Federation (Victorian Branch). *The study* is a five-year longitudinal telephone survey of people who were aged 16 to 58 years and in the Australian labour force in March 2006 (i.e. prior to the implementation of the *Work Choices* legislation on 27 March 2006). New entrants and re-entrants to the labour force after March 2006 were not 'in-scope' for the study.

relational type aspects of the psychological contract (e.g. job security when loyal to the organisation).

Table 1 Employee attitudes to management, 2010, per cent

	Agree: Feel consulted		Agree: Trust manager		Agree: Fair treatment of employees	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
<i>Managerial</i>	81.4	420	73.2	379	82.5	430
<i>Non-managerial</i>	71.2	2,329	67.2	2,142	77.6	2,530
<i>All employees</i>	72.6	2,749	68.0	2,521	78.0	2,960

Note: Responses of agreed and strongly agreed with the statements were combined.

Population: Employees in Waves 1 to 4 inclusive only

Source: Australia at Work Wave 4

More positive views about management are held by non-managerial employees who are young, with shorter job tenure, working in casual employment and in small workplaces. While there is no notable difference in employee attitudes between the private and public sectors, a slightly higher proportion of employees working in the not-for-profit sector hold positive attitudes to their managers. Surprisingly, very little difference in the overall agreement levels is found between female and male non-managerial employees' attitudes to their managers. However, given women are more likely to work part-time hours, be employed as casuals and work in certain occupations, this is an area that deserves further investigation.

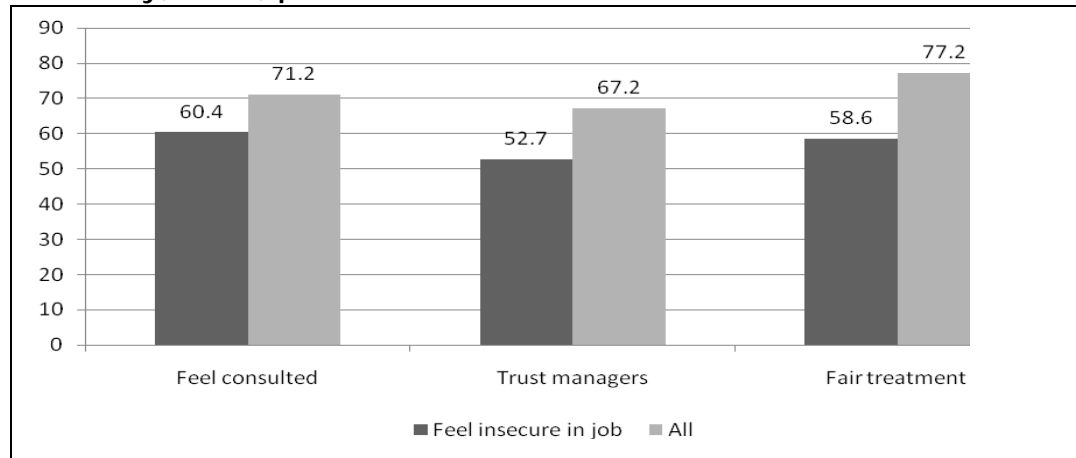
Regardless of job tenure, union members are less likely to feel consulted, trust managers or feel employees are treated fairly. However, this difference is more pronounced among employees with longer job tenure. These findings are consistent with Freeman and Medoff's (1984) theory of exit-voice at work, whereby employees who have more experience with management become more cynical, particularly regarding trust. If non-unionist employees become jaded, and it is possible and worthwhile to join a union, they are much more likely to do so. If they are unable or do not want to join a union, they are likely to leave the organisation and get another job. Similarly, Bryson and Freeman (2007) found unionised workers reported more problems with management than non-union workers (cited in Benson and Brown 2010). Benson and Brown (2010) therefore suggest that union members have higher expectations concerning voice. However, it may also be possible that in the period in this and other recent studies, union presence or voice in the workplace, and/or collectively bargained conditions were under greater challenge.

Job security, workplace safety and attitudes to managers

Both job security and workplace safety are two aspects of the work environment that impact on employee attitudes to their managers. Figure 1 charts the relationship between reported attitudes of non-managerial employees to management depending on perception of job security. It shows that perceptions of job security materially affect attitudes to management across all three dimensions. Quite simply, workers who feel more insecure are much less likely to report being consulted by or receive fair treatment by their managers. The response levels around workplace consultation, trust in managers and fair

treatment are lower for employees who feel insecure in their jobs compared to the overall response levels of each of the three variables.

Figure 1, Non-managerial employees' attitudes to management by job insecurity, 2010, per cent



Note: Responses of agreed and strongly agreed/disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statements were combined.

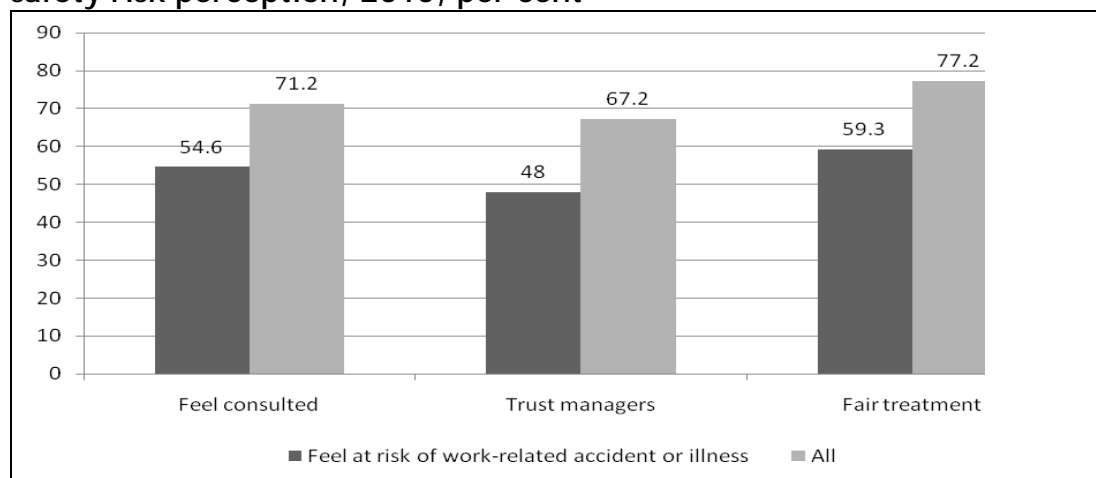
Population: Non-managerial employees in Waves 1 to 4 inclusive only

Source: Australia at Work Wave 4

When employees have to deal with uncertain environments, a variety of meanings can be attached to what is happening in the workplace. It is perhaps then not that surprisingly, there appears to be a link between employee perceptions about job security and attitudes to their managers.

Figure 2 reports the relationship of non-managerial employees to management depending on perception of workplace safety. It shows that employees who feel at risk of experiencing a work-related injury or illness have much lower agreement levels around workplace consultation, trust in managers and fair treatment. It is likely that a tangible way that managers can express their concern for employees is to provide safe workplaces. A failure to do so reduces worker support for their managers.

Figure 2, Non-managerial employees' attitudes to management by workplace safety risk perception, 2010, per cent



Note: Responses of agreed and strongly agreed/disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statements were combined.

Population: Non-managerial employees in Waves 1 to 4 inclusive only

Source: Australia at Work Wave 4

What do our findings suggest?

This factsheet reports on employee attitudes to three aspects of management behaviour: workplace consultation, trust in managers and perception of fair treatment. While employees as a whole reported generally high perceptions of management, the findings suggest that employees strongly value secure jobs and safe working environments. The significance of the links between perceptions of job security and workplace safety and attitudes to management suggest that these two issues are very important parts of the modern employment contract.

Our findings have a number of important implications for human resource management and industrial relations. In terms of human resource management for instance, it suggests that monitoring of line management (by such mechanisms as 360 degree appraisal) and the design of employee involvement schemes are both critical, as they have the capacity to affect employee perceptions of the whole organisation and foster higher levels of commitment and performance. In addition, the findings suggest that organisations should provide training to managers in a range of communication skills. The link between these activities and firm performance is now a matter supported by research in HRM circles and beyond for more than a decade.

There are also implications for unions in terms of who is and currently likely to be open to becoming and staying a union member and why that is the case. But again, the way unions communicate with and involve members and potential members is a critical. Unions are experimenting with a number of novel approaches to winning better conditions for workers, communicating with them and ways of member participation in union governance. This research reinforces the need for this sort of thinking to continue.

Similarly, policy makers should notice that perceptions of choice, fairness and consultation are all important issues for workers and that both safety and job security materially affect those perceptions. The legislative framework governing work, including the safety of work, carries both practical and symbolic implications for employee perceptions. Given the link between such perceptions and economic and social outcomes, it is an issue that goes well beyond mere industrial relations and/or occupational safety.