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A Healthy Dose of Loyalty

Being Loyal Is Our Innate State, Scientists Say; It Yields Benefits



By SHIRLEY S. WANG

Even as society seems to make it increasingly difficult for people to remain loyal to their jobs and relationships—and their sport teams—a growing body of research indicates there are real benefits for people who commit for the long haul.



While society seems to devalue loyalty, it is becoming increasingly clear that people benefit psychologically when they remain faithful. Shirley Wang explains.

Scientists have documented the health benefits of staying in a long-term romantic relationship, including reduced illness and longer life. Employees who stick with a single company rather than job-hop tend for the most part to be better compensated financially and to be more productive and creative, other research has found. Another study shows that continuing to root for one's hometown team helps ease the anxiety of moving to a new city.

Studies looking at loyalty and trust suggest that these qualities may be fundamental to human relationships, some psychologists say. In life, there are few guarantees that another person isn't

going to hurt us, they say. Therefore, staying loyal to someone, and preserving a mutual feeling of trust, allow people to be able to function with others without constantly suspecting their motives, they say.

Are humans inherently loyal? Or is loyalty a mercenary calculus?

Loyal

Something in between

Mercenary

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Long-term commitment in relationships is tied to a greater sense of life satisfaction, happiness and a host of practical benefits, such as shared assets and children, research shows. People with strong social support or social engagement have been found to have lower risk of diabetes, hypertension and heart attacks. One study of 4,000 men over a 22-year period found that married men in their 50s, 60s and 70s lived significantly longer than those of the same age who were never married or who were divorced or widowed, according to research by the RAND Center for the Study of Aging.

Another study, of 130 newlywed couples, found that almost all of the couples' conflict discussions were about whether or not they could count on the other person. Couples who were best at developing trust and loyalty in the relationship were those who focused on maximizing the well-being of their partner, not themselves, says John Gottman, director of the Relationship Research Institute in Seattle and an emeritus psychology professor at the University of Washington.

Fixing a relationship after one partner breaks the trust, through infidelity, for instance, requires both partners to desire to mend ties. But forgiving a partner too readily could have repercussions, says Eli Finkel, a social psychology professor at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., who studies relationships.

Dr. Finkel and colleagues followed 72 heterosexual couples for five years after their marriages. The couples were asked to report their own levels of forgiveness, agreeableness, self-respect and self-esteem every six to eight months. People who were apt to forgive their partner without that partner making amends tended to show a gradual erosion of their self-respect, according to work the researchers published last year in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Take the Fidelity Test

1. Should you stay with one employer? Or seek a higher salary by moving around frequently?
2. If you stay in a job for a long time, what do you gain, according to a study of Silicon Valley workers?
 - a. independence
 - b. creativity
 - c. a corner office
3. You move from a city with a second-rate sports team to a new city. Do you stay loyal to your old team? Or root for the team in your new home?
4. You're a newlywed. What is the most likely source of a fight with your spouse?
 - a. how much time you spend together
 - b. whether you can depend on each other
 - c. division of household chores
5. Your partner cheats on you but swears it meant nothing. If you can forgive, how can you tell if you have a good shot at staying together?
6. How do sports fans continue to root for teams that lose year after year?

For answers, please scroll to the bottom of the article.

Loyalty also brings benefits in business. In Silicon Valley, where companies frequently poach employees from each other, the pay of 50,000 software employees was studied by Kathryn Shaw, an economics professor at Stanford Business School, and her colleagues. For most experienced workers, typically those who had at least five years of experience in the field, the bulk of wage growth comes from staying with an employer, not hopping between companies. People who had a minimum of experience of five years with a single employer typically got 8% increases in compensation a year compared with about 5% for people with a history of job hopping. Dr. Shaw, who conducted the study in 2006 on behalf of the National Bureau of Economic Research, says she found a similar pattern among workers with relatively fewer skills, such as people who install car windshields.

"There's a perception in Silicon Valley that there's a gain to be had by hopping from employer to employer," says Dr. Shaw. "But short-term hopping is not advantageous to the employer or employee."

While it is rare for employees to spend their whole career at one company, most are better off if they stay put for five to 10 years, she says. One exception is young workers, who should initially be

searching for a firm that offers the right match for their talents and interests, she says.

Employees who stay with a single employer longer also are more productive and creative than those who haven't been at the company as long, Dr. Shaw says.

"The more that you're familiar with the organization... the more you can look at it and say there's another way to do it," says Mark Keefe, a human resources manager at Atlantic Health System, a 10,000-employee nonprofit hospital concern in New Jersey. The company tries to retain employees by giving merit-based pay increases that top most of its competitors, and other perks. Last year, Atlantic retained 98.5% of its employees.

Professional football players also may benefit from sticking with one team. An analysis of quarterbacks, running backs and kickers conducted for *The Wall Street Journal* by football statistician Rupert Patrick showed that in the first year following a team change, players tend to perform better on the playing field compared to the prior year. But over the longer term players who stayed with one team for five or more years performed better statistically.

Players may have greater motivation when they get to a new team, or the coaching staff may be more willing to highlight the player and give him more playing time, says Mr. Patrick, a member of the Professional Football Researchers Association. But when a player isn't moving around, he works with the same playbook and teammates, which can help in the long run, he says.

Fans of spectator sports also seem to reap psychological benefits from remaining loyal to their teams. In a study of more than 400 people who moved cities in the previous year, researchers found that most fans continued to root for their hometown team, rather than shift allegiance to the teams in their new city, according to a report

published last year in the journal *Science Quarterly* by Scott Tainsky and Monika Stodolska, professors in the department of recreation, sport and tourism at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

The researchers also studied the transplanted residents' television-viewing habits of their hometown team and found that there was a spike in game-viewing when a game was being played in the city they left behind. The fans seemed to be tuning in as much to see views of their hometown or to reminisce about their experiences at the stadium as much as to watch the games, the researchers suggested. Staying loyal to a hometown team may help newly transplanted residents keep a sense of identity in their new city by maintaining a connection to the place they left behind, the researchers suggested.

Answers

1. Most workers are better off if they stay put for five to 10 years, a Stanford study found. People with a minimum of five years with a single employer typically got raises of 8% a year compared with about 5% for people who job hopped.
2. (b.) Creativity. Despite perceptions that creativity mainly comes from new blood, well-established work teams are often able to brainstorm new ideas.
3. Most people stay loyal to their hometown team. It helps them keep a sense of identity in a new place and a connection to their hometown.
4. A study of 130 newlywed couples found that almost all of the couples' conflict discussions were about whether or not they could count on the other person.
5. For many people, staying together is more likely if both put a premium on loyalty. But don't forgive too quickly for the sake of loyalty. It can hurt your self-respect, a study found.
6. Putting down the other team (or its fans) helps. So does recalling past events inaccurately (e.g., the good times were better than they were). Or take pride in your ability to be loyal and hope to look smart someday.

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