

# Psychologist reveals the secrets of leadership

August 20 2007

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New research has found that leaders are most effective when they transform themselves into ‘one of us’. The study by the University of Exeter, University of St Andrews and Australian National University shatters the stereotype that ‘good’ leaders must have a specific set of qualities. Instead, it shows that leaders must embody the qualities and opinions of the group they seek to influence, even down to personal appearance.

The research, published this week as the cover story of the journal *Scientific American Mind*, found that the best leaders work by shaping themselves to fit the group, before shaping the group itself to fit with their policies and proposals.

Professor Alex Haslam of the University of Exeter’s School of Psychology identified a key technique of leadership. He said: ‘Leaders try to transform themselves so that their personal biography and even their personal appearance come to be symbolic of the group as a whole. Just look at how Margaret Thatcher altered her dress, her hair, her voice so as to resemble Britannia. Or the way in which George Bush, in his jeans, leather jackets and cowboy boots, tries to come across as an American everyman. Even his gaffes make him appear like a regular guy.’

Professor Steve Reicher, a social psychologist at St Andrews said: ‘In the past, leadership scholars considered charisma, intelligence and other personality traits to be the key to effective leadership, which suggests that good leaders can dominate followers by sheer force of will. In recent

years, however, a new picture has emerged. Effective leaders - whether bosses, community leaders or heads of state - must work to understand the values and opinions of their followers before trying to mould them accordingly.’

The researchers believe that by symbolising ‘who we are’, leaders are in a position to shape ‘what we want’ and ‘what we should do’.

The research paper, *The New Psychology of Leadership*, by Stephen D Reicher, S. Alexander Haslam (Exeter) and Michael J. Platow (ANU) is the cover story of the current edition of *Scientific American Mind*.

The full article can be accessed online at:

[www.sciammind.com/article.cfm? ... 9DF-38898D75F4702C44](http://www.sciammind.com/article.cfm? ... 9DF-38898D75F4702C44)

Source: University of Exeter

Citation: Psychologist reveals the secrets of leadership (2007, August 20) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2007-08-psychologist-reveals-secrets-leadership.html>

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