

Study: Americans Expect Business Leaders to Be White

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Despite decades of progress for minorities in corporate settings, Americans still expect business leaders to be white, and they judge white leaders as more effective than their minority counterparts. This is according to research published in the July issue of the Journal of Applied Psychology by professors from Duke University, the University of Toronto and Northwestern University.

The research team, led by assistant professor Ashleigh Shelby Rosette of Duke's Fuqua School of Business, conducted a series of experiments to determine whether race still affects people's judgments of leader effectiveness and leader potential.

"Over time, people develop implicit beliefs about the traits and behaviors of leaders and this combination of characteristics evolves into a standard called a 'leader prototype,'" Rosette said. Previous research has shown leaders who are viewed as compatible or consistent with the prototype are evaluated more favorably than leaders who are less compatible with these sets of beliefs, even when the leaders' performance is identical.

Traditionally, research in this area has focused on leadership traits, such as intelligence, goal-orientation and charisma, or behaviors such as acting in a decisive manner. However, Rosette and co-authors Geoffrey Leonardelli of Toronto's Rotman School of Management and Katherine Phillips of Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management sought to explore whether race, specifically "being white," was an attribute of

people's leadership prototype.

The research team conducted four experiments in which 943 undergraduate and graduate students with work experience reviewed fictitious newspaper clippings and performance reviews. Subjects then evaluated fictitious CEOs, project leaders and division leaders.

The participants consistently assumed the leaders to be white when the race was not disclosed, even when the racial composition of the existing leaders in the organizations were described as 80 percent African American, 80 percent Hispanic American or 80 percent Asian American. Yet, this same presumption of "whiteness" was not observed when the participants assessed non-leaders.

The researchers found no relation between the study participants' race and their impressions of the leaders' race. Participants who identified themselves as racial minorities assumed the leader to be white as often as the white participants.

In experiments where the leader's race was identified, white leaders were evaluated to be a better match with traditional leader expectations, such as successful performances, than were racial minorities. Participants who were told that a leader was responsible for the organization's success and then asked to rate that leader's effectiveness judged white leaders to be more effective than minority leaders who had achieved the same level of success.

"Our results challenge a common explanation for racial bias -- that people who are white give preferential treatment to other people who are white," Leonardelli said. "Our finding that Americans of all races associate successful leadership with being white demonstrates just how embedded this bias can be."

Rosette notes the white standard of leadership is evident in the current U.S. presidential race: “Traditionally, the U.S. presidential office has been held by white men and there likely exists a white standard of leadership for this position. Barack Obama is an African American aspiring to hold this office, but he does not match the leader prototype. This initial perception of a lack of fit or mismatch between his race and the racial characteristics generally affiliated with the presidential office has clearly been a challenge for his campaign and will continue to confront him if he is elected president.”

“The irony is that the very individuals who are disadvantaged by the white standard are those in the best position to change it,” Leonardelli added. “Whether or not Obama will be president is for the American people to decide. However, electing a president who is not white could help to chip away at the white standard.”

Rosette, Leonardelli, and Phillips hope their findings provide a better understanding of the disparity that persists between whites and racial minorities in business leadership positions.

Provided by Duke University

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