

Follow the leader: How those in charge make themselves known

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Do you find yourself leading groups, or are you naturally more comfortable following others? Research published today shows that if you want to be a leader you're better off at the edges of a crowd, and not in the middle of the action.

In a series of experiments on crowd behaviour, a research team from the Faculty of Biological Sciences at the University of Leeds also found that successful leaders display more decisive behaviour, spending less time following others and acting more quickly than others in the [group](#).

Lead researcher Jolyon Faria, who conducted the study as part of his PhD, said: "It was interesting to find that the most effective leaders remained on the edges of the group and attempted to lead from the front. You'd think leaders in the centre of the group should interact more often with others and therefore be more effective but here this wasn't the case."

Understanding how individuals behave in groups is important in predicting how the whole group behaves en masse, and has implications for the management of our physical environment.

Faria said: "For instance, a better understanding of human crowd behaviour can help us design buildings more effectively for evacuation scenarios. It can also inform strategies for moving large numbers of people, useful for events where large crowds need to be moved as quickly and efficiently as possible by a relatively small number of event

staff."

The research team, funded by the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC), asked groups of eight students to walk around continuously in a specified area and remain as a group without speaking or gesturing to one another.

One person was asked to move towards a target, whilst remaining a member of the group, without letting the others know that he or she was leading them to a target. In a second set of experiments, the students were told to follow "the leader", but not told who the leader was.

In the second set of experiments, it was found that those leaders who remained on the edge of the group were able to move their group towards a target much more quickly than the leaders that chose to remain in the centre.

"We wanted to find out how people decided who to follow" said Faria. "We found that people were able to identify their leader by what position the leader takes, which goes some way to explain how animals in groups - such as birds and fish - can be led by only a small minority, even when [leaders](#) don't signal their identity.

"Our findings have illustrated a general principle behind group behaviour. These can also be applied to animal groups, something which could help in the management of the natural environment, as well as in the management of the urban environment."

Provided by University of Leeds

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