

ILR research finds leaders don't rock the boat

December 14 2010, By Mary Catt

Creativity might be the trait many CEOs say is essential for senior leadership, but research by an ILR professor and colleagues shows it can actually block you from reaching the top slots.

"Our three studies show that when people voice creative ideas, they are viewed by others as having less leadership potential," said Jack Goncalo, assistant professor of [organizational behavior](#) in Cornell's ILR School. The research will be published in the [Journal of Experimental Social Psychology](#) in 2011.

Its implication: "Creative people are getting filtered out on their way to the top."

The reason is that our deeply held expectations of "creative people" and "effective leaders" often clash.

Creative people are viewed as risky and unpredictable, while leaders are expected to reduce uncertainty and uphold the norms of the group. Although people claim they want creativity, when given the opportunity, they actually preserve the status quo by sticking with unoriginal thinkers, data suggests.

This might help explain why many of the 1,500 leaders surveyed in 2010 by IBM's Institute for Business Value doubted their abilities to lead through complex times, Goncalo said.

Perhaps promoted for their unspoken promises to preserve the status quo, [leaders](#) are often expected to change the status quo when they arrive at the top -- an uncanny mismatch that was previously unidentified, researchers said.

[Bias](#) against selecting the most creative thinkers for the highest jobs was pinpointed through three studies, Goncalo said.

One study included 346 employees working in jobs that required [creative problem](#) solving. The other two, at universities in the northeast United States, involved more than 180 students each.

Jennifer S. Mueller of the University of Pennsylvania and Dishan Kamdar of the Indian School of Business conducted the research with Goncalo.

Provided by Cornell University

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