

Low-status leaders are ignored

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People who are deemed social misfits or "losers" aren't effective leaders, even if they are crusading for a cause that would benefit a larger group, according to new research from Rice University, the University of Texas and Universitat de Valencia.

The study's authors observed the contributions of 80 participants in a repeated public-goods game and found that players were more likely to mimic the actions of a leader they perceived as a high-status individual; they ignored leaders perceived as low-status and, when they had a chance, punished them for trying to lead.

"In a team, naming someone a leader is not sufficient to create effective leadership," said Rick Wilson, co-author of the study and professor of [political science](#) and statistics and psychology at Rice. "The status of the leader -- the way in which the leader is chosen -- determines the extent to which the rest of the subjects will follow."

In each round of the research experiment, players were given 50 experimental currency units (ECUs) and had to decide what portion to keep for themselves and how much to contribute to a group account. Whatever was put into the group account was doubled and then split equally by the group of four. For any individual, this meant that it was better to retain everything for their private account, since each ECU put into the group account would yield only a .5 ECU return. However, if everyone in the group put in everything, they would each double their ECUs -- hence the public-goods problem.

Each group had a leader whose contributions everyone could see. The leader was determined by scores on an arbitrary trivia quiz. In half the experiments, the leader was the player who had the highest score (high status); in the other half, the player who had the lowest score (low status) was designated as the leader. The [group members](#) were told how their leader was chosen.

At the end of each of the 20 rounds, each follower observed his or her own earnings and the leader's contributions. The leader observed the contributions of each of the followers. On average, players allocated between 40 and 50 percent of their ECUs to the public pot, whether they had a high- or low-status leader. However, contributions from followers with low-status leaders dropped off in later rounds even though their leaders began giving more and more, crusading for followers to make greater contributions to the public pot that could benefit everyone in the group.

Groups with high-status leaders showed greater stability, and the followers were more likely to imitate their leaders -- even though those leaders maintained the amount of their initial contributions.

"In teams with high-status leaders, followers are more likely to go along with them, even though the leader does not necessarily set a good example," Wilson said. "A high-status leader should be willing to risk making unilaterally high contributions to the public good, because the followers will do the same."

Wilson and his co-authors, Catherine Eckel of the University of Texas and Enrique Fatas of the Universitat de Valencia, also studied the effect of punishment. In the 21st round of the game, followers were given the option to punish the leader by issuing points that decreased a player's profits in the experiment, and vice versa. Punishment was costly both for the person initiating the punishment and for the person punished.

Once punishment was introduced, contributions increased significantly for the groups with a low-status leader and only slightly for those with a high-status leader. However, low-status leaders punished others and, in turn, were punished more. They made significantly less money in the experiment than any other player.

"Punishment, while important to enforcing cooperative norms in many social dilemmas, does not boost contributions in all instances," Wilson said. "The bottom line is that high-status leaders don't need to punish because they are followed. Low-status [leaders](#) need to rely on punishment to motivate followers, but it is costly for everyone. It's like they are the Rodney Dangerfields of the world -- they get no respect. When they use punishment to boost contributions to the public good, their followers retaliate."

More information: The study, "Cooperation and Status in Organization," was published in the August issue of the *Journal of Public Economic Theory*, available at [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10 ... 010.01472.x/abstract](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1016/j.jpet.2010.01.014)

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