

Bosses' beliefs about workers can impact their success

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American companies and organizations spend billions of dollars every year on leadership training for their managers. To improve job performance they ought instead to focus on what managers believe about their employees, a study by the University of California, Riverside shows.

How [leaders](#) view their employees tends to become a self-fulfilling prophecy, concludes Thomas Sy, assistant professor of [psychology](#) at UC Riverside and a longtime business leadership consultant.

In what he describes as the first study to examine leaders' conceptions of followers, the psychologist found that "if managers view followers positively — that they are good citizens, industrious, enthusiastic — they will treat their employees positively. If they think of their employees negatively — that they are conforming, insubordinate and incompetent — they will treat them that way," he said. "Manager beliefs about employees impact organizational outcomes." These include interpersonal liking and relationship quality between leaders and followers, as well as followers' job satisfaction and trust in leaders.

Sy suggests that it is possible to change what leaders believe about their followers, a business strategy that could improve worker performance. The results of his study appeared in the paper "What do you think of followers? Examining the content, structure, and consequences of implicit followership theories," which was published in the peer-reviewed journal *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision*

Processes.

In a five-phase study involving hundreds of workplace leaders, Sy identified six core conceptions by which managers categorize their employees - industry, enthusiasm and good citizen, qualities representing positive conceptions of followers; and insubordination, incompetence and conformity, qualities representing negative conceptions of followers.

This process of categorizing others operates automatically and spontaneously, he said. Managers act on those conceptions - known as implicit followership theories (IFTs) — even if they don't realize they hold those beliefs about their employees.

Leaders who have more positive conceptions or IFTs may behave differently toward followers than those who have more negative IFTs, he wrote. Because how leaders think often affects what leaders do, IFTs may determine leadership style and leaders' treatment of followers. "...(P)erformance differences between followers may largely result from leaders' perceptions of and subsequent interactions with their followers. ... Research has demonstrated that followers tend to fulfill the perceptions leaders have of them."

Because performance evaluations often correspond with perceivers' implicit theories, leaders may more easily recognize potential in followers that fit their implicit theories of followership and may not recognize potential in equally capable followers who exhibit less congruence, Sy explained.

"This is particularly relevant in multicultural environments," he wrote. "For example, among other traits, Western leaders may recognize the potential of followers who show enthusiasm, and label and treat these individuals as 'high potentials.' However, Western leaders may overlook the same potential in equally capable followers who may not exhibit

enthusiasm because their cultural values may inhibit expression of emotions (e.g. Eastern cultures such as Japan and China). This bias may also occur for gender."

Personnel decisions are often based on leaders' perceptions of followers, which are often systematically biased, Sy said. "Individuals who endorse more negative followership theories may be prone to providing punitive evaluations of followers. Conversely, individuals who endorse more positive followership theories may be prone to providing positive evaluations of followers. As such, an important practical implication is that leaders should develop awareness of their IFTs profile and how these perceptions may bias their cognitions and behaviors toward followers."

As part of the research Sy also developed a management tool to assess leader beliefs about followers.

"We've confirmed what people intuitively know," he added. "Now we're providing practical ways to impact leadership outcomes."

Provided by University of California, Riverside

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