

Power can corrupt even the honest

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When appointing a new leader, selectors base their choice on several factors and typically look for leaders with desirable characteristics such as honesty and trustworthiness. However once leaders are in power, can we trust them to exercise it in a prosocial manner?

New research published in *The Leadership Quarterly* looked to discover whether power corrupts leaders. Study author John Antonakis and his colleagues from the University of Lausanne explain, "We looked to examine what Lord Acton said over 100 years ago, that 'Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.'"

To investigate this the authors used experimental methods to distinguish between the situational and individual component; and determine if power corrupts or if corrupt individuals are drawn to power.

After completing psychometric tests to measure various individual differences, including honesty, participants played the 'dictator game' where they were given complete control over deciding pay-outs to themselves and their followers. The leaders had the choice of making prosocial or antisocial decisions, the latter of which resulted in reduced total pay-outs to the group but increased the leader's own earnings.

The findings showed that those who measured as less honest exhibited more corrupt behaviour, at least initially; however, over time, even those who initially scored high on [honesty](#) were not shielded from the corruptive effects of power.

"We think that strong governance mechanisms and strong institutions are the key to keeping leaders in check," concludes Antonakis.

"Organisations should limit how much [leaders](#) can drink from the seductive chalice of power."

More information: This article is "Leader corruption depends on power and testosterone" [DOI: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2014.07.010](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2014.07.010) and appears in *The Leadership Quarterly*, published by Elsevier.

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