

Sad leaders often achieve better outcomes than angry leaders

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Leaders often believe that they should show anger to make subordinates more compliant, thinking they will then be seen as more effective at work or within their organization. They also feel it is bad if they show emotions such as sadness. While it is true that angry leaders are perceived by others to wield more power, followers warm more easily to those showing more vulnerable emotions, says Tanja Schwarzmüller of the Technical University of Munich in Germany. This study, published in Springer's *Journal of Business and Psychology*, wants to find out how perceptions about leaders' power bases might explain why angry leaders are considered to be more powerful than sad leaders, yet still score lower on their leadership report cards.

Schwarzmüller and her colleagues conducted three sets of experiments. In the first two, groups of students or working adults assessed videos depicting angry and sad leaders. In the third, an [online survey](#) showing relevant photographs was used.

As expected, angry leaders were viewed as having higher levels of different types of position power. This includes being legitimately instated over others, having the right to give or withhold rewards and coercive power to punish others. Followers hence seem to think that leaders displaying anger, in comparison to leaders showing sadness, more strongly stress their legitimate position within the hierarchy of an organization and the control over punishment and reward that is available to them. When it comes to personal power, however, leaders displaying sadness seem to appeal to followers more strongly.

"Subordinates form impressions of their leaders when they view their displays of emotion in negative work situations", says Schwarzmüller, who believes leaders should consciously reflect on the emotions they display.

She says that although leaders might benefit from stressing their legitimate power, displays of anger could backfire as they cause subordinates to infer that their "boss" has strong coercive power but weak referent power. Referent power refers to the ability of a leader to influence followers by making them identify and sympathize with him or her, and is a crucial prerequisite for ensuring [followers'](#) loyalty and commitment.

Showing [sadness](#) comes at a cost too, as it often reduces a leader's legitimate power. It has its benefits, however, as it decreases leaders' assumed power to punish - a power base that negatively affects leadership outcomes.

"Although angry [leaders](#) might be considered more powerful in general, their resulting [power](#) seems to rest upon a weak foundation", says Schwarzmüller.

More information: Tanja Schwarzmüller et al, It's the Base: Why Displaying Anger Instead of Sadness Might Increase Leaders' Perceived Power but Worsen Their Leadership Outcomes, *Journal of Business and Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1007/s10869-016-9467-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-016-9467-4)

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