

Leadership expert says political skills important to leader satisfaction

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Andrew Wefald, an author of "Transformational leader attributes" and associate professor, teaches students in Kansas State University's Staley School of Leadership Studies. Credit: Kansas State University

Leaders skilled at influencing others may be happier at work, according to a Kansas State University researcher.

Andrew Wefald, associate professor in the Staley School of Leadership Studies, says political skill—the ability to build connections, foster trust and influence other people—is a fundamental quality of a transformational leader and being good at it can increase job satisfaction and engagement.

"Most people think of political skills as manipulative and negative but, basically, it is building connections with other people," Wefald said. "In a positive sense, politically skilled people foster supportive and trusting environments to benefit organizations and are going to be more transformational leaders, which will lead to higher job satisfaction."

Wefald and his collaborators—Kansas State University alumni Kyle van Ittersum, assistant professor at Angelo State University, and Jennifer Mencl, associate professor at the University of Minnesota Duluth—recently published "Transformational leader attributes: interpersonal skills, engagement, and well-being" in *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*. The study assessed the relationship among interpersonal skills, work engagement, transformational leadership and job satisfaction using surveys from 278 employees.

The researchers tested three types of interpersonal skills: emotional control, defined as control of one's own emotions; emotional sensitivity, defined as understanding emotions of others; and political skills, defined as understanding people and being able to influence them in ways that contribute to personal, group or organizational success. Out of the three, political skill was the only skill to have an independent positive relationship with transformational leaders and their job satisfaction.

"Think of the best boss you ever had—most likely they were very politically skilled," Wefald said. "Leading without political skills is possible but it is going to be like wearing a weighted vest."

Wefald said there are four components of political skills: networking ability, apparent sincerity, social astuteness and interpersonal influence.

"These are all things a good leader is going to be able to do," Wefald said. "Someone with those skills is going to be in a better position to help the organization because they will be better able to get things done than someone who doesn't have those skills."

The researchers dug deeper and looked at the relationship of high political skills to participants' reported work engagement and [job satisfaction](#). Those who were highly engaged in their work had high transformational leadership skills and high political skills.

"Work engagement is the level of a person's physical, mental and emotional energy with their job and if they are fulfilled from that work," Wefald said. "Being engaged at work leads to several positives for the individual, such as more energy and stamina, and the organization, such as less employee turn over."

Wefald said organizations could use this information to develop employees' political skill or select employees with those skills.

"It is a developable skill but there are many personality traits and variables that may prevent a person from developing a high level of the skill from nothing," Wefald said. "Some people's window might be wider, some people's might be narrower—it's just going to depend on the person they are and their personality."

According to Wefald, developing political skill to increase engagement and satisfaction, particularly among managers, will benefit any organization.

"Any time you have people who are in hierarchical groups and limited

resources—which is every organization ever—you are going to have people vying for access and control over those resources," Wefald said. "That's politics. Someone who is able to get along with everybody, get things done and is on board with the projects being done is going to help an organization as well as his or her own career."

More information: Jennifer Mencl et al, Transformational leader attributes: interpersonal skills, engagement, and well-being, *Leadership & Organization Development Journal* (2016). [DOI: 10.1108/LODJ-09-2014-0178](https://doi.org/10.1108/LODJ-09-2014-0178)

Provided by Kansas State University

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