

Forget sharp suits and shoulder pads—good leaders should only look like their staff

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Forget sharp suits – for most employees the ideal leader actually looks exactly like themselves. Credit: University of Exeter

Forget sharp suits and shoulder pads – for most employees the ideal leader actually looks exactly like them, not the designer-clad employer often portrayed in TV or films, according to a new study.

Academics from the University of Exeter Business School and the Bradford University School of Management asked [people](#) to choose photos of models who looked like excellent, average and mediocre leaders. The academics wanted to find out if and how people judged their leadership qualities of their bosses based on their appearance. The results showed everyone had a completely different view of what a leader looked like. This puzzled the experts, until they realised it showed people unknowingly draw on their own-self-image because nobody has a clear idea of what a leader should actually look like, or what personality

they should express.

Dr Sarah Gilmore, from the University of Exeter Business School, said: "When we looked at how people described themselves and compared it with how they described leaders, we found their 'ideal' or 'excellent' leader was a mirror image of themselves'.

"So those we surveyed who were fans of lipstick and nail varnish said an ideal leader would look very feminine, and those who favoured a masculine look described someone who was more of a tomboy. Those who thought discipline was a good thing chose people who looked commanding, and those who valued enthusiasm chose someone who looked enthusiastic. The interesting thing is, none of this was immediately apparent until we dug deep into our analysis – certainly our interviewees were very unaware of what they were doing!"

"This shows in the absence of any clear idea of what a leader should look like, the best way to be the best one is to just be yourself."

The 20 people who took part in the in-depth interviews had been on leadership development programmes or described themselves as leaders. Interviews lasted up to an hour and a half and included questioning on their career history. Participants were asked to think about two excellent, two average and two poor leaders they have worked with and describe their appearance. They were then given 50 photographs cut from newspapers and magazines, of 25 men and 25 women in suits and less formal dress, covering all ages, sizes and ethnicities. The interviewees were asked to choose two photographs of people they thought looked like ideal, mediocre and poor [leaders](#) and explain their choices. They were also asked what they would say to these people.

Provided by University of Exeter

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