

# Singling out 'rising stars' in companies could demotivate staff, research shows

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Firms that fast-track individuals to leadership positions and identify "rising stars" risk demotivating their employees, a study shows.

Singling out people and telling them they could be a future boss can dampen the enthusiasm among other workers and undermine their commitment to the company, according to research done by a team of academics from the Universities of Queensland, Exeter, Groningen and Rotterdam.

Succession planning is crucial for companies; however, this research shows that schemes to find the next generation of leaders can have unintended consequences for the majority of staff who are not selected.

Academics have found only telling a select few they were likely to progress to leadership has a [negative impact](#) on everyone else.

Professor Miguel Fonseca, from the University of Exeter, who co-authored the research, said: "It must be tempting for companies to think that telling people they are a future leader will inspire them and encourage them to do well at work. But in fact it may demotivate those not chosen, and may undermine the commitment of the many who are rejected."

In the first study, 256 participants recruited from Amazon M Turk were invited to imagine that they were working in a job and that the position of team leader was soon to be available and everyone was able to apply. Participants were divided into three groups – one was given no information about their leadership potential, the others were told they had either low potential to be a leader or high potential to be a leadership. Individuals who received feedback that they have low leadership potential had lower ambition and lower organizational [commitment](#) relative to those who received feedback that they had high potential.

In a second study, the authors replicated the environment, but this time measured 264 individuals' performance in a simple real-effort task.

Those told that they were likely to be leaders performed better in a subsequent task than those told that they were unlikely to become leaders.

Professor Michelle Ryan, from the University of Exeter, who co-authored the research said: "Our research shows it is crucial to study the effects not only on those who are selected as our future leaders, but also on those who are not in the leadership spotlight. These people become frustrated and lose motivation, and this affects their performance.

"It would be better for companies to show employees there are multiple career trajectories, jobs which involve leadership but also other roles which are central to the organisation. Not everyone wants to be a boss."

"How feedback about [leadership](#) potential impacts ambition, [organizational commitment](#), and performance" is published in *The Leadership Quarterly*.

**More information:** Niklas K. Steffens et al. How feedback about leadership potential impacts ambition, organizational commitment, and performance, *The Leadership Quarterly* (2018). DOI: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2018.06.001

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