

Leaders valued over managers, regardless of fit

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Leaders tend to be loved more than managers, reflecting an implicit societal bias that may be tempered by thinking critically about it, new Cornell University-led research suggests.

Romanticization of [leadership](#) over time has put [decision-makers](#) at risk of overvaluing prototypical leaders—who are seen as inspiring and motivating—even in situations calling for prototypical management skills such as hiring, supervising and budgeting, according to Kevin Kniffin, assistant professor in the Charles H. Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management, part of the Cornell SC Johnson College of Business and the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Cornell University.

In a series of studies, Kniffin and collaborators asked participants to imagine a hypothetical company that has strong products and market potential but is unprofitable, because it has been poorly run with ineffective systems and processes.

The scenario was crafted to describe an organization needing management expertise. But by significant margins, survey participants preferred to hire a chief executive with strengths associated more with prototypical leading than managing.

"A 'love for leadership' seems to influence a lot of decisions that don't match situational needs," Kniffin said. "The bias for leadership is among those to which people and organizations should apply deliberative thinking to make better decisions."

Kniffin is the lead author of "On Leading and Managing: Synonyms or Separate (and Unequal)?" published in the current issue of the *Academy of Management Discoveries*.

The research was motivated in part, Kniffin said, by the authors' frustration with imprecision in how people and organizations refer to leadership.

"The word 'leadership' gets thrown around so much these days," he said,

"that you need to wonder what people mean by the word."

The popular infatuation with leaders can be seen in organizations, the media and scholarship, the researchers said. In the 1970s, the mission statements of top business schools used management-related words but now emphasize leader development. The Wall Street Journal's use of the term "managers" has trended down since 1989 while "leaders" has trended up. And a Google Scholar search shows academic references to "transformational" or "charismatic" leadership have skyrocketed since 2004.

Kniffin, Detert and Leroy began by asking if popular opinion considered leading and managing to be synonymous—or distinct—activities. Their first set of studies provided fresh empirical evidence for the latter: Survey respondents credited leaders with the ability to inspire, encourage, motivate, guide and teach, in contrast to managers who supervise, fire, boss, oversee and budget.

The scholars in a second set of studies attempted to address the "so what?" question, asking whether people preferred prototypical leaders regardless of the situation, including in high stakes hiring or investment decisions.

Study participants rated the leader-associated activities as more valuable and less learnable, and said they'd be more flattered to be called great at those activities. They also favored leaders to run the hypothetical company—a potential cause for concern, the researchers said.

"If organizations need more prototypical managing and instead sign up for more prototypical leading," Kniffin said, "then they're leaving themselves in the lurch."

In a final set of studies, the scholars investigated whether an

intervention—slowing down the decision-making process through forced deliberation—could influence the apparently automatic, internalized preference for a prototypical leader.

They asked study participants to allocate \$10 million in stock purchases based on a leader or manager taking over the same imaginary company. Some participants had to make decisions in under a minute, while others could take their time and had to write down how leader or manager skills fit (or did not fit) the circumstances.

Under time pressure, nearly 60% of investments were allocated to leaders in two independent samples. But with more time to reflect on the best fit, those allocations dropped as low as 43% in one of the samples. A follow-up study with a third sample asked the "fast" group to review its initial allocations without time pressure and produced similar results. After a second look, they allocated significantly less to the leader—43% instead of 58%.

"If you slow people down to force consideration of situational needs," Kniffin said, "then they'll make a decision that's less influenced by this love for leadership."

Among the research's implications, the authors said, is that selection committees should guard against leadership bias to ensure candidates' strengths match organizational needs. Also, leadership development programs and business schools should not promote prototypical leadership at the expense of context-sensitive decision-making, they said, and should reemphasize managerial skills likely to prove valuable in careers.

"Beyond seeming to confirm this love of leadership," the researchers wrote, "our findings highlight that this preference may come at the high cost of failing to appreciate the value of management in many

situations."

More information: Kevin M. Kniffin et al. On Leading and Managing: Synonyms or Separate (and Unequal)?, *Academy of Management Discoveries* (2019). [DOI: 10.5465/amd.2018.0227](https://doi.org/10.5465/amd.2018.0227)

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