

The burdens of informal leadership

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Ambitious employees in informal leadership roles can get burned out when they don't receive support from their bosses, according to new research from the University at Buffalo School of Management.

Recently published in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, the study

found that while it's commonly assumed that informal leaders are satisfied by their unique status and recognition from others, they could lose motivation from overwork and a lack of support.

"To maintain their status and fulfill others' expectations of them, informal leaders face increased demands to keep claiming their [leadership](#) status," says Paul Tesluk, Ph.D., professor and dean of the UB School of Management. "If formal leadership support is low or absent, informal leaders can struggle to fulfill necessary team needs and feel less control over decisions, skills and resources, which results in greater levels of exhaustion."

The researchers conducted a series of four studies across 202 people in 52 work teams to investigate factors that make informal leaders feel dissatisfied at work. First, they issued a survey that examined how formal leadership support helped moderate employees' informal leadership [status](#) and their satisfaction at work. Second, they conducted a series of interviews to investigate when and why informal leaders experience dissatisfaction, and identified energetic activation as a potential mediator. Studies three and four tested the mediator under different formal leadership conditions.

Their findings challenge the results of other studies on informal leadership, which presume that employees naturally benefit from taking the lead.

"Existing business education and training encourages employees to be 'extra milers' and do their best to assist colleagues and organizations," says Tesluk. "As a result, companies prioritize hustle cultures and encourage employees to take on informal leadership roles. But these 'good eggs' need to be protected from being exhausted—and it's their formal leader's responsibility to support and energize them."

Tesluk says organizations can encourage and retain their overachieving employees in a number of ways.

"One way to recognize the contributions of informal leaders is certainly through promotions or bonuses, but more importantly, informal leaders need to experience psychological trust with their managers, which supervisors can foster by providing mentoring and support when coordinating with peers and clients, reducing workloads where feasible and granting more autonomy in decision-making."

More information: Chia-Yen (Chad) Chiu et al. Leading the team, but feeling dissatisfied: Investigating informal leaders' energetic activation and work satisfaction and the supporting role of formal leadership, *Journal of Organizational Behavior* (2021). [DOI: 10.1002/job.2511](https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2511)

Provided by University at Buffalo

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