Three fears that make people reluctant to act as leaders

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Leadership can come from anyone in an organization, regardless of their formal role or title. Yet some individuals are reluctant to take on leadership roles, potentially depriving the company of useful

contributions and limiting their own personal growth.

Julia Lee Cunningham, professor of management and organizations at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business, and colleagues recently conducted several studies into the reasons that prevent people from acting as leaders. The results—described in a forthcoming article in the *Academy of Management Journal*—show that specific worries about how others perceive them are often to blame. The research also suggests ways to counteract these fears and help people fulfill their leadership potential.

Lee Cunningham recently discussed her research on the podcast Business and Society with Michigan Ross, an excerpt of which is here.

Why is it important, especially in today's world, for an individual to think of themself as a leader?

Leadership is something most organizations and employers look for from all levels of a hierarchy. This is one of those qualities that we at the [business school](#) want to develop, and the companies that recruit from Ross specifically look for. It can come from anywhere, regardless of position or role. Because most people don't really start out believing that they are leaders, oftentimes what predicts leadership behavior is leader identity—whether or not you see yourself as a leader.

This seems to be particularly important, especially in the new world of work, where people are organized in a way that does not follow traditional hierarchy. Even in traditional organizations, it seems to be more important than ever to encourage everyone to see themselves as a leader and take up leadership opportunities. This concept of leader identity has been shown to predict people's motivation to lead in a given situation.

You argue in the paper the idea of being a leader isn't a switch that you flip—you learn how to be a leader and then you are one—but rather, it's a state that people can move into as a situation warrants. Could you explain that distinction?

When we did the survey, we asked people, "Do you think of yourself as a leader?" The responses to that question really varied a lot. So some people would say, "Yes, absolutely. Under all circumstances, I see myself as a leader and I'm a leader," but most people will say, "Ah, it really depends on the situation."

In today's workplace, people are constantly being pulled into different types of teams and committees. That might be a long-term commitment, but it can also be a short-term, fluid team formed to solve a specific problem. People may or may not see themselves as a leader depending on which teams they are going into. It is important to think of leadership as a contextually dependent identity that people either endorse and internalize in the moment or not.

That raises the central question of your paper, which is why some people don't think of themselves as leaders. How did you approach answering that question?

This was really interesting. Despite the fact that employers search for more leader types when they hire new employees, and despite the fact that we encourage all U-M students to be the leaders and the best, only about 16% of the MBA students we surveyed identify themselves as a leader. What was also interesting was that the female participants were significantly less likely than male participants to identify as leaders.

So, I and my collaborators, Sue Ashford and Laura Sonday, sat down with this puzzle and really started to zoom in on why this might be the case. Why is a leader identity so uncomfortable for so many people, and why is it that people are so ambivalent about being a leader?

We conducted many studies, including a qualitative investigation. Based on the survey responses, we identified three types of reputational fears that people have:

- Being seen as bossy and domineering. People tend to associate being a leader with being bossy, pushy and domineering, and that is something that they do not want to come across as.
- Seeming different. We found people don't really want to signal that now that they're calling themselves a leader, they are somehow different from everyone else.
- Seeming unqualified. This is extremely common, and it's something that goes hand-in-hand with the imposter syndrome many of us have: "Maybe I'm not the best person because I don't know everything, and maybe people won't take me seriously." That kind of fear plays a significant role.

What were some other key findings from your research?

We found all three of these concerns that we identified seemed to make us less likely to see ourselves as leaders. So once these fears really kick in, people tend to avoid thinking of themselves as a leader, and as a result, they are also less likely to behave as leaders and less likely to be seen as leaders by other individuals.

Their supervisors rated them as less of a leader, and their peers also rated them as less of a leader. So these fears actually have real negative

consequences when it comes to whether you actually step up and lead in a given situation.

Then, we spent a lot of time talking about why this might be the case. What is it about these fears that can change something that is so deeply ingrained as your personal identity? We found most people will not publicly admit they have these fears about how they will be seen. People find it a lot easier to say, "This is just not who I am," or "I'm just not the leader type." This is an easy way out.

In the paper, you identify some practical implications of this for companies and other organizations. Can you give an example?

In one of our studies, we found that participants who listen to a podcast in which we framed leadership as risky were less likely to identify or act as leaders than the people who listen to an alternative podcast that described leadership as low-risk.

This suggests that simply by presenting leadership as less risky and lower stakes—for instance, you can clarify that leadership mistakes are very common and expected and you will not get a black mark on your record just because your leadership wasn't successful—managers can really help encourage employees and help them feel more comfortable with seeing themselves as leaders.