

Problematic 'zombie leadership' lives on in many cases

February 8 2024



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Outdated perceptions of leadership persist across society despite being repeatedly debunked, University of Queensland research has found.

Professor Alex Haslam from UQ's School of Psychology led research into ideas about [leadership](#) which are still popular despite being harmful to individuals, groups, and organizations.

"It's known as 'zombie leadership' because despite being demonstrably false, these claims refuse to die," Professor Haslam said.

"One example is the assumption that leadership is exclusive to people with special qualities which set them apart from the masses."

"Zombie leadership also considers authority as only involving leaders."

"But leadership can never be a solo process because it's always grounded in relationships and connections between leaders and those they influence."

Other problematic examples include the idea that all leadership is the same, that good leadership is easily recognized, that people can't cope without leaders, and that leadership is always good.

Professor Haslam said zombie leadership has no empirical support but lives on because it flatters and appeals to elites and to the anxieties of ordinary people in a world seemingly beyond their control.

"Zombie leadership is poisonous for organizations and [society](#)," Professor Haslam said.

"If leadership is considered a special skill limited to special people, it signals it as an elite and exclusive activity and helps to justify inequalities of esteem, recognition, and reward."

"This creates problems not only for organizations but for leaders themselves—because it fuels [narcissism](#) and failure to appreciate and

capitalize on the potential of others."

The research outlines strategies that can be used to overcome zombie leadership.

"People first need to understand what zombie leadership is, so they recognize when they come across it," Professor Haslam said.

"Understanding leadership as a group process can help leaders be more inclusive."

"And then championing an approach which sees leadership as a process everyone can contribute to will make groups more successful."

"It's time to work together to stamp out zombie leadership because it has persisted for far too long."

The [research paper](#) is published in *The Leadership Quarterly*.

More information: S. Alexander Haslam et al, Zombie leadership: Dead ideas that still walk among us, *The Leadership Quarterly* (2024). DOI: [10.1016/j.leaqua.2023.101770](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2023.101770)

Provided by University of Queensland

Citation: Problematic 'zombie leadership' lives on in many cases (2024, February 8) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-02-problematic-zombie-leadership-cases.html>

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