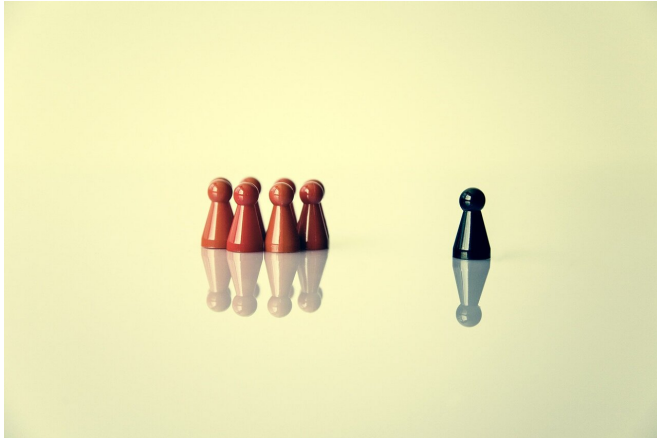


Successful leaders are 'one of us'

22 October 2020



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A successful leader is one who creates a shared sense of "us-ness" in the groups they lead, according to University of Queensland research.

UQ School of Psychology researchers led a large-scale meta-analysis of international studies on the extent to which leaders are seen as embodying a [sense](#) of "we" and "us" on leadership outcomes.

Dr. Nik Steffens said leaders were found to be most effective when they engage in identity leadership by embodying a shared group spirit they seek to lead.

"Identity leadership involves creating a sense of shared social identity, or a sense of 'us-ness,' in the groups they lead, and then working to represent, advance, and embed that sense of shared [social identity](#) through policies and actions," Dr. Steffens said.

"We tend to focus on great leaders as individuals and what [personal characteristics](#) they have that makes them different from other leaders—the great 'I.' However, this research shows that effective leadership is not something about leaders and what makes them special as individuals but

something that derives from social groups and a shared sense of 'we.' Effective leaders are those who capture what is special about 'us' by embodying what 'we' stand for. This contrasts with our tendency to focus on the individual greatness of leaders but ultimately what makes leaders effective and enhances the chance of others responding enthusiastically to their leadership is the extent to which they embody our collective shared sense of 'us.'"

Dr. Steffens said this can be seen in all sorts of organizational, social, and political contexts including in the way national leaders have responded to the COVID pandemic.

"New Zealand's Jacinda Ardern took a 'we're all in this together' approach to [leadership](#) and was able to be seen as 'one of us' during the pandemic," Dr. Steffens said.

"Her empathy and connection with the community was evident, and she used phrases like 'as we all prepare to hunker down' and during lockdown delivered video updates in jumpsuits from her couch—being at home like everyone else. Contrast the success of New Zealand's coronavirus response with that of the UK—where Boris Johnson and Dominic Cummings have given the impression that the rules for leaders are different to those for everybody else—and the infection rate numbers speak for themselves. The differences in COVID numbers between New Zealand and the UK demonstrate that leaders being seen as group prototypical—as 'one of us'—is far from a trivial determinant of leader outcomes."

The research is published in *Organizational Psychology Review*.

More information: Niklas K. Steffens et al. Advancing the social identity theory of leadership: A meta-analytic review of leader group prototypicality, *Organizational Psychology Review* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/2041386620962569](https://doi.org/10.1177/2041386620962569)

Provided by University of Queensland

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