Leader -- or Just Louder?

A new study finds that the person who displays the most obvious characteristics of a leader isn't always the best person for the job. Confidence and outspokenness do not necessarily translate into ability, it finds.

By Michael O'Brien

When it comes to leadership positions, most credible theories assert that people cannot attain such a position simply by behaving assertively and forcefully; rather, they need to possess superior task abilities and leadership skills.

But in a new study out of the University of California at Berkeley and published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,*the authors assert that individuals who are "high in trait dominance" -- or have the tendency to behave in assertive, forceful and self-assured ways -- attain influence because they behave in ways that make them appear competent, even when they actually lack competence.

Co-authors Cameron Anderson, an associate professor of organizational behavior, and doctoral candidate Gavin Kilduff also found that individuals higher in trait dominance were rated as more competent by fellow group members, outside peer observers and research staff members, even after controlling for the individuals' actual abilities.

The research is based on two tests they devised to determine how easily someone could take over leadership of a small group -- independent of whether they were qualified to do so.

The first test involved 68 undergraduate students, who were broken up into groups of four and told to organize an imaginary nonprofit group. The work sessions of the teams were videotaped and the members of the groups later watched the tapes and rated each other on both their level of influence and their level of competence.

Independent judges also viewed and rated the team members' performance.

The researchers found that both the judges and the team members deemed the most outspoken team members as possessing higher levels of general intelligence, among other traits.

A second test, involving 100 different undergraduate students, was then undertaken to determine if the people who talked the most did so because they had the most to offer.

This time, the four-member teams competed against other teams for a $400 prize by solving math problems taken from the Graduate Management Admission Test. Before the problem-solving began, though, the team members divulged their real-world SAT math scores to the researchers, but not to their team members.

After the second round was completed, the same results were found: The people who spoke up most often were rated as leaders as well as math whizzes.

But Anderson and Kilduff also found that those highly rated team members were not the ones who gave the most correct answers; nor were they the ones whose SAT scores suggested they would be the most competent in the test.

In fact, the people who were the highest rated were the ones who simply offered the most answers, whether right or wrong.

The results were unexpected, Anderson says.

"What surprised us the most was the strength of the effects we were observing," he says. "Dominant people were so confident in their competence, even though they were no more competent than anyone else.

"To put it more concretely, dominant personalities (those in the top quartile on dominance scores) gave answers 63 percent of the time, whereas less-dominant personalities (those in the bottom quartile on dominance scores) gave answers only 36 percent of the time -- even though, again, these two groups of people were equally competent."

Marshall Goldsmith, a New York-based executive coach and author the new book *Succession: Are You Ready?,* says he isn't surprised by the findings, adding that he teaches in the M.B.A. program at the University of California at Berkeley.

"When you ask people to pick the leader in the room, it's not going to be the person who sat there in silence," he says. "Would you be shocked if the opposite was true? Of course you would."

He says that successful people are "delusional. The more successful we become, the more delusional we become," meaning that leaders often think highly of themselves, independent of their credentials, and thus will speak out based on their self-opinion.

So does the research suggest people follow a "fake it 'til you make it" approach to gaining leadership positions?

"It doesn't mean they're faking it," Goldsmith says. "They probably do believe they are more competent. ... Successful people do tend to have an unrealistically positive self-image. We're not as good as we think we are, but the fact that we think we're great, encourages us to try more, demonstrate more self-confidence and become better than we would have, if we didn't have that positive self-image."

But, as the research points out, he says, leaders need to get ongoing feedback from people around them "so they don't live in their own little world of godliness."

"There's a thin line between self-confidence and arrogance. It doesn't take much to cross the line," he says.

Fred Foulkes, director of the Human Resources Policy Institute at Boston University's School of Management and a professor in the organizational behavior department, says that the findings are not unusual, but he doesn't necessarily put a lot of stock in them.

To determine who will make the best leaders, Foulkes says, it's better "to give less weight to interviews and superficial-type things and really look at the overall process."

"Most times, selection is much broader than these types of impressions; it can be a long and drawn-out process," he says.

It's also not clear how well the results of this experiment would transfer to the real world of business as the assessment of leadership skills is a much more complex undertaking than the experiments indicate, he says.

Anderson, the study's co-author, agrees that more than a cursory assessment is necessary.

If an organization is "trying to pick the 'right' people, in terms of who is actually the most expert and skilled, gather more data on them instead of relying on first impressions and their apparent confidence," he says. "And use more objective tests of ability before trusting in someone's competence, if at all possible."

HR executives scouting for future leaders should be wary of just using confidence as an indicator of ability, he says.

"Yes, confidence and ability are often correlated, as when people who are truly talented exhibit more confidence in their opinions and ideas," Anderson says. "But, often confidence and ability are only mildly related, or even unrelated."

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