High-Powered Leaders:
When Leadership Power Becomes Counterproductive

What is the connection between power and leadership? Does having unassailable authority make you a better leader? Three business researchers – Leigh Plunkett Tost of the University of Washington, Francesca Gino of Harvard Business School, and Richard P. Larrick of Duke University – suggest that too much power can have a negative effect on one's leadership effectiveness. In a paper written for the Harvard Business School the researchers support the following conclusions:

1) High-power leaders often dampen the productive exchange of ideas at meetings. The reason for this includes the common perception that the powerful leader is the gatekeeper of quality ideas and, because of this, he/she isn't particularly interested in the ideas of underlings. Certainly this perception isn't necessarily fair, but it often permeates the thinking of team members who have high-power leaders. Results can be devastating because potentially productive ideas are not presented.

2) The authors argue "that a leader's experience of heightened power produces verbal dominance, which reduces perceptions of leader openness and team open communication." In short, team members begin to feel that the high-power leader doesn't really have an interest in open communication. The resulting lack of frank communication damages team interaction and synchronization.

3) High-power leaders run the risk of falling into a psychological ethos where team members feel inhibited, fearful, and devalued. Within this kind of psychological environment teams will quickly become dysfunctional.

4) The authors suggest that these potentially negative effects of perceived power can be overcome if the leader makes it abundantly clear that each team member is a valued contributor. Not only must the high-powered leader articulate this notion frequently, but he/she must act accordingly.

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