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Power interrupts, and absolute power interrupts absolutely. Francesca Gino and colleagues discover that a high-powered boss can lead a team into poor performance.

by Michael Blanding

When Harvard Business School Associate Professor Francesca Gino invites high-powered business leaders to address her class, she often observes an interesting phenomenon. The guest speakers announce that they are just as interested in learning from the students as teaching them, and encourage them to ask questions and make comments. In reality, however, the speakers often do the opposite—dominating the time and not allowing for much discussion at all.

"As professors we do this too," admits Gino. "It's very difficult when think you have the right answer not to put it out there." At the same time, she has observed, by hogging the discussion, these leaders not only limited their own learning but also made the class less productive as a whole.

Gino wondered if the same dynamic could be occurring in business, with dominating leaders stifling creative ideas that might otherwise emerge from group discussions and making the teams less productive.

EVEN SUBTLE WAYS OF MAKING PEOPLE FEEL POWERFUL HAVE POWERFUL EFFECTS ON BEHAVIOR."

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FRANCESCA GINO

Francesca Gino is an associate professor in the Negotiations, Organizations, and Markets Unit at Harvard Business School

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The observation would run counter to the way we usually think about group dynamics—surely, a strong leader naturally improves the functioning of the team. Together with Leigh Plunkett Tost of the University of Michigan and Richard P. Larrick of Duke University, Gino explores this question in *When Power Makes Others Speechless: The Negative Impact of Leader Power on Team Performance*, forthcoming in the *Academy of Management Journal*.

In a series of studies, they found that when leaders were focused on their own sense of power, they can hurt the performance of their teams—but with an important catch. The effects only occur when leaders are *actually* in a position of power.

Gino and her colleagues differentiate between a "subjective sense of power," when someone believes they have control over others, and actual power, when someone has formal authority over how resources are allocated or how decisions are made. The two often go hand in hand, but not always. Sometimes in a group situation without a formal leader, for example, a leadership role can be assumed by a person who believes he or she has superior knowledge or skills.

UP THE MOUNTAIN

Gino, Larrick, and Tost tested this dynamic in a simulation involving people planning an imaginary climb up Mount Everest. The team consisted of different specialists—including a professional climber, a doctor, and a photographer—each of whom scored points according to how many of their individual goals were met.

For each group, the researchers designated a formal leader. In some cases they created feelings of power by asking the leaders to write about a time when they held control over others; in other cases, they didn't.



Some high-powered leaders feel compelled to dominate the conversation.

The results were striking. The "high-power" leaders who had done the writing exercise dominated the discussion, talking for 33 percent of the time, while the "neutral-power" leaders talked almost half as much, 19 percent. As a result, the first group of leaders missed important clues, such as information from the doctor about the oxygen running low or opportunities by the photographer to earn more points if they stayed an extra day at a certain base camp.

In those cases, the team as a whole suffered as well, achieving an average of 59 percent of the goals in the first group, compared to 76 percent in the second group.

"Even subtle ways of making people feel powerful have powerful effects on behavior," concludes Gino.

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In a separate study that tested a group's ability to solve a murder mystery, however, Gino and her colleagues found that individuals in some situations aren't always so easily cowed. For this study, in which individual team members held different clues essential to solving the mystery, the researchers used two variables—in some cases, appointing a formal leader and in some cases not; and in some cases, priming individuals to feel powerful and in some cases not.

They found that in cases when someone felt powerful but was not recognized as being in a position of authority, team members were able to override that person's domination of the conversation and add their own input. Of the four groups, the two without a formal leader had the same performance, solving the mystery about 60 percent of the time. But the groups with a formal leader who was also primed to feel powerful did the worst, getting the right answer only about 25 percent of the time.

Surprisingly, however, the best groups were those who had formal leaders not influenced ahead of time to feel powerful—they solved the mystery nearly 80 percent of the time.

OFTENTIMES WE BEHAVE THE WAY WE DO BECAUSE WE ARE NOT AWARE OF THE EFFECTS OF OUR ACTIONS.”

"My sense is that the leader is sort of stepping back," says Gino. "It's more of what you like to see, where the leader is orchestrating the conversation, but everyone is talking."

In other words, strong leaders *can* improve team performance, but only when they go into a situation with a sense of humility about their own relative power.

REINFORCING THE MESSAGE

The researchers expanded on that point in the last study, in which participants were asked to play the role of a management team tasked with advising the CEO on which CFO candidate to hire. In this case, the researchers appointed a formal leader for each group and primed some, but not all, to feel powerful. In half of the cases, however, they also performed a simple intervention, reminding the group leaders that each participant had unique insights to contribute.

In cases when this intervention occurred, the groups with high-power leaders did the best, coming up with the right answer an average of 60 percent of the time, slightly better than neutral-power leaders without intervention (56 percent) and neutral-power leaders with intervention (50 percent).

All three groups, however, blew away the high-power leaders who lacked intervention reminding them to listen to others—getting the answer 0 percent of the time. That suggests a powerful opportunity to improve performance just by making leaders aware of the dangers of hogging airtime in a discussion.

"I want to believe that oftentimes we behave the way we do because we are not aware of the effects of our actions," says Gino. "Bringing this type of awareness to leaders walking into group decision-making situations could set up a different process whereby they benefit from what others have to offer."

These findings don't let non-leaders in groups off the hook, however. Being aware of the negative effects generated by an overpowering leader can make non-leaders feel more empowered to assert their own point of view—whether or not the person dominating the conversation is a formal leader.

LIFE AND DEATH

The Gino team has started a new study, observing group decision-making situations in the field. Focusing on the health-care industry, they are experimenting with interventions to help improve outcomes in situations in which doctors—never known to be shy about exercising power—collaborate with medical colleagues in situations with real-life effects on patients.

If anything, the results should be more dramatic than the earlier experimental studies, where prompts were used to create feelings of power in group members. In these real-life situations under study, the doctors come fully equipped with a sense of power ingrained in them by having wielded authority over others for years.

Getting leaders to listen to others and to facilitate a productive group discussion in those circumstances would be powerful indeed. [WK](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Blanding is a staff writer for *Harvard Business School Working Knowledge*.

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COMMENTS

CHRISTINE WOLFF VP, GROUP CISCO ALLIANCE, DIMENSION DATA

Did the research surface any tactical methods leaders with dominant-tendencies can use to improve self awareness, and dampen down that urge to interrupt? As a serial interrupter, I'd personally appreciate alternative to my poor-performing scotch tape method.

SUMINTRA PA - CIVIL SERVANT, GOVERNMENT

I truly agree with this finding, I have seen this approach to be very productive and should be adopted by any business or institution.

Fantastic approach.

ADRIAN SALAMA DEAN OF UNIVERSIDAD GESTALT (MEXICO CITY), UNIVERSIDAD GESTALT (MEXICO CITY)

Is really interesting to see how testosterone can overkill creativity in the group. Great article

HUGH QUICK HOME, NONE

I think that you are exploring the whole range of human relationships, well I hope you have success. I know that leaders can inspire people to do things that they could not do on their own but how do they do it? I think there are as many different ways as there are people

DON CEO, ADAMS ADVERTISING , GHANA.

A very insightful piece. I have always held the view that mbeing a leader is not about standing on top of the table and shouting yourself hoarse to be heard. I do subscribe to the step back and lead approach which sometimes is misconstrued as being a mark of a weak leader. Fortunately its not. Thank you for validating my view.

HARRY BUTLER DIRECTOR, PROJECT MANAGEMENT SUPPORT, I&E DIVISION, URS CORPORATION

I find that the same phenomenon exists in group working sessions when one member of the group, not necessarily the leader, dominates the conversation by talking non-stop, talking loudly, and interrupting others. Even though these "bullies" may have valid points to make, they stifle input from others, and this dilutes the effectiveness of the group's output.

SIBUSISO KUMALO MANAGER: SERVICE SUPPORT & SERVICE DELIVERY, SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL OIL COMPANY

I have found that the domineering types not only do they kill team spirit, but murder team cohesion through their propensity for self indulgence and seem to suffer from terminal cases of delusion of grandeur.

Not only do some have answers to every questions and a solution to problem, but "know" better/much more than the subject experts they hired. They see any comment or suggestion to the contrary from their subordinates as a challenge to their authority.

KAPIL KUMAR SOPORY COMPANY SECRETARY, SMEC(INDIA) PRIVATE LIMITED

Powerful leaders are generally proud of their knowledge and do not give adequate attention to others' views - in fact they are not good listeners. Thus, they do not derive advantage of shared knowledge which, they do not venture to understand, can also help a lot. No one need have a feel that he knows everything - this is a tall claim and not possible. A successful leader has to be humble and must have due regard for what the people below him suggest - such feed back is very necessary and useful. Teamwork does not deliver proper outcomes if the team leader only has a say. A collaborative atmosphere is always better.

SACH CHAUDHARI TECHNICAL DIRECTOR, PARADISO SOLUTIONS

I have been guilty of over-powering some technical discussions to get through the meeting quicker. But the negative impact can be sensed on the morale of the team members and overall sense of ownership goes down.

PROF S. RANGANATHAN AIYAR RETIRED DEAN

It s true that a dominant leader can be counter productive. In universities/institutes where I had served as Head of the Department, Director and now retiring as Dean, I have found that 'my being' with people alone has brought results and I had to motivate all my colleagues right from lecturers to office and on to students and the management team to agree on issues which normally are not accepted across the Board. Harvard has yeomen services in this connection and we have ever taken these lessons for practice and hence progress in organisational growth. This article/research work could yet another dimension in this pursuit. Best wishes to the team of Gino..Prof.S.Ranganathan Aiyar, Coimbatore, INDIA

AIM DRILLING ENGINEER, N/A

There are industries, perhaps specific jobs that require power pose approach over subordinates. Usually such industries or jobs happen to be in an atmosphere having high degree of order and synchronized organization in order to achieve efficiency. On the other hand, there are jobs that require input from team members and make use of each individual's creativity. Despite wide availability of information, it is difficult to train a human brain to be creative all of a sudden when it spent majority of its time obeying standard operating procedures, regulations...etc. Likewise, it is difficult to put a creative brain into an atmosphere of order.

Furthermore, when cultural aspects are considered (I doubt you would be playing this game with a Chinese or an Indian majority in your team simply because you will be run over for being passive), I guess the highly functional team arises when there is a high degree of trust among members. Also, from my experience the next important factor is that these trusting team members are capable/skilled at expressing their views, honest views, without upsetting peers with either their words or vocal tones.

All in all, in addition to short term objectives of this experiment (and the next one with the doctors), I think professor Gina needs to look at long term benefits and best approaches of a larger sample size as well as specific job sets and industries. Because without that it becomes a mere theoretical exercise that cannot be implemented practically in real life.

MURRAY CFO, MINING COMPANY - SOUTH AFRICA

Multiply this by the national average and whole countries become poor performers. This is a bigger problem than it first appears. Gert Hofstede's 'power distance' cultural dimension says similar things.

JOANNA WARD, MSN, BSN, PNP, RN INTERIM DIRECTOR FOR WOMEN & CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL CARE, MANY COMMUNITY AND UNIVERSITY HOSPITALS COAST TO COAST

Excellent article! Getting MD's to the table in order to partner with nurses at the bedside, respecting nursing science is a necessity for best patient outcomes. There is definitely an opportunity for this, especially in smaller more rural hospitals in the country where doctors still see themselves as superiors who rule, unfortunately for one Louisiana community where C-sections exceed the national average by as much as 20%!

KUCHANNA SRINIVASAN CEO, ESD BUILDERS & DEVELOPERS. PVT. LTD

I am curious to see the result if every member of the team did not have many insights or contributions to make but had a only limited role to play!

LENEA ENGLAND CONSULTANT, INNOV8 CHANGE

Excellent article touching on leadership, communication, attitude, and EQ intervention. It still amazes me (after all these years) to see how a small change in attitude and perception can make such a significant difference in performance. Thank you.

CAMILLE SMITH LEADERSHIP COACH, WORK IN PROGRESS COACHING

sadly, we're taught about power and authority, keeping our head down and stifling our voice at an early age: school. I notice this phenomenon even in my 7 yr old niece when she wants to play 'school'. She gives detention with authority, and her "students" (her 11 yr old sister, dad and 82 yr old grandfather) play their role to an historical, stereotypical "T."

ALEX

I'm wondering... did the "all powerful leaders" get slapped back in their faces with these results ?

PAUL NICHOLAS DIRECTOR, SOUL-CHAPLAIN CONSULTANCY

Looking, listening, thinking, speaking and deciding are all different in terms of perceptual and cognitive processing - and when all done in one brain their efficiency is impaired. Dominating leaders try to do it all. And like so many other things efficiency can be increased by sharing such activities between several brains.

NITIN

to me the findings are not really astounding, nevertheless, full marks for the scientific approach towards the problem and measuring those! good work.

SURENDRANATH.A CEO & PRINCIPAL CONSULTANT, NULINE HR CONSULTING, BANGALORE, INDIA

It's a good article and thanks for Gino for her research findings. It is true that dominant leaders do kill teams if they continue to behave the same way continuously. But it is necessary for a leader to be dominant at times of crisis management. Secondly we must distinguish dominant leaders and powerful leaders. Powerful leaders know their job and their EQ will be high while dominant leaders need not be so and they lack people skills. The reason for the dominating leader the way they behave may have some psychological aspects behind their behavior. In my opinion such dominating leaders would be either law breakers or corrupt or may be both which makes them to dominate others so that no one voices against them leading to kill the whole team.

STEVE DIETRICH PARTNER, FRG

Could Obamacare be the poster child for the dangers of this type of leadership.

TONY EVANS INTERIM GENERAL DIRECTOR, UKRAINIAN SUGAR COMPANY

Thank you for the thought provoking article. I would love to see this done in my own current circumstances.

A couple of thoughts I would be interested in:

- 1 What condition of team working was the group in prior to the activities? The key issue for me is understanding the starting point.
- 2 What happens when you indulge these approaches with real teams, where they are already seen as low or high performing?
- 3 Was account taken of each group's team roles and therefore the 'inherited' balance of team skills? In particular, how able was the leader to 'chair' the group/team?
- 4 Given the nature of some of the findings; would the author like to comment on how this might fit with the notion that quoted company boards, at least in the 'west' - appear to perform better over the medium/long term if they have female members?

JIP? FRANK ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, UNIVERSITY OF HRADEC KR?LOV? CZECH REPUBLIC

I think that this negative phenomenon can also be found and watched in the life and relationships inside political parties and those too dominant leaders can spoil seriously for a long time internal democratic behaviour and democratic functioning inside such a party.