The Downside of Powerful Leaders

We've all heard the saying "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Well, a new study from Dr. Connson Locke at the London School of Economics and Cameron Anderson from the University of California has found another downside to power: strong leaders may be poor managers because the impression of power they give off stifles the opinions of others. At a time when specialist knowledge is so valuable to the decision-making process, anything that discourages dialogue and encourages silence among team members can be damaging, the authors concluded.

In one lab experiment, participants were assigned roles of supervisor or subordinate and were then asked to make a decision. Observers analyzed the behavior to see the impact on the subordinate of the supervisor using command body language. The results showed that the more a supervisor adopted a powerful demeanor, the smaller the contribution of the subordinate. This was true regardless of the gender of the two participants.

In another experiment subordinates were asked to participate in a job search and were asked to help pick one of three candidates for a job based on a written profile of each person. The leader (who was part of the research team, unbeknownst to the subordinates) always argued for the least-qualified candidate. When the leader projected a powerful persona, 69 percent of the subordinates agreed with the conclusion. When he did not do that, only 42 percent agreed.

It's worth considering what may happen outside of a lab environment. If you're the type of leader who projects a powerful demeanor you may not get honest answers when you ask subordinates for their input. To get people to feel comfortable voicing their opinion they must believe you want it and will give it due consideration. The other potential problem is that many executive programs teach future leaders the importance of projecting power to those around them, which keeps the concept of an all-powerful leader as the ideal model. This may need to be re-examined as more research is done.