

## Leadership and listening

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WHAT makes a good leader?

One study suggests that the role is most effective when held by an individual with strong communication skills.

This research also suggests that teams could be more effective when allowed to choose their own leaders.

Researchers in Germany and the United States set out to determine the qualities inherent in a good team leader, a position that can seem somewhat ambiguous. The team leader cannot behave like a hierarchical superior and delegate tasks to teammates, for example. They remain an employee like any other, even if they are responsible for the success of a project and the performance of a team.

That's why it's so important to choose the right person for the job. Many companies appoint team leaders as part of a career move or an internal promotion. But the authors of recent research, published in the journal *Frontiers In Psychology*, suggest that this approach might not necessarily be the best.

They argue that the most effective work teams could be those that choose their leader. The academics reached this conclusion by conducting an experiment with 123 volunteers. They were randomly divided into 41 groups of three. They were asked to work with their teammates on a complex task. All teams received a 15-minute training session, during which each of the three members was able to interact one-on-one with their other two teammates. The aim was to familiarise each team member with the skills and expertise of the others.

Communication is key

Study participants were then asked to complete a questionnaire to determine the role of each team member in the communication chain. In particular, they had to determine who would be the central link, i.e. the person who would ensure that information flowed smoothly within the same working group. In fact, the researchers ensured that teammates could only communicate with each other via a central member, or leader, in order to maintain their interdependence.

Once the questionnaires had been completed, the academics told all the groups who would be their central member. Some found that their team leader was the one they had chosen, while others discovered that their preference had not been taken into account. In both cases, however, the researchers explained that the decision had been taken randomly. The purpose of this subterfuge was to ensure that the teams who had "chosen" their leader did not feel they had an advantage.

This experimental protocol revealed that participants who communicated the most during the test phase were more likely to be chosen as team leaders. This can be explained by the fact that their communication skills were perceived as a guarantee of expertise.

What's more, the groups who were most effective in carrying out the task in hand were those who had "chosen" their leader. This highlights just how essential effective management and organisation are to the success of a project.

Teamwork is more likely to succeed if it is supervised by a leader who listens to their teammates. It's not a question of being the boss, but rather of ensuring that knowledge is shared. Good managers are those who know how to listen in order to be better heard. – AFP Relaxnews