



Media Release

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Lead or Follow: What Sets Leaders Apart?

Leaders are more willing to take responsibility for making decisions that affect the welfare of others. In a new study, researchers at the University of Zurich identified the cognitive and neurobiological processes that influence whether someone is more likely to take on leadership or to delegate decision-making.

Which school should I send my child to? Do I need to scale back the workforce in my company? Should the soldiers launch an attack tonight or wait until tomorrow? Parents, company bosses and army generals as well as teachers and heads of state all have something in common: They all have to make decisions that do not just affect themselves, but also influence the welfare of others. Sometimes the consequences will be borne by individuals, but sometimes by whole organizations or even countries.

Responsibility Aversion makes all the difference

Researchers from the Department of Economics investigated what it is that sets people with high leadership abilities apart. In the study, which has just been published in the journal *Science*, they identify and characterize a common decision process that may distinguish followers from leaders: Responsibility aversion, or the unwillingness to make decisions that also affect others.

Controlled experiments and brain imaging

In the study leaders of groups could either make a decision themselves or delegate it to the group. A distinction was drawn between “self” trials, in which the decision only affected the decision-makers themselves, and “group” trials, in which there were consequences for the whole group. The neurobiological processes taking place in the brains of the participants as they were making the decisions were examined using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI).

People who take on responsibility need more certainty

The scientists tested several common intuitive beliefs, such as the notion that individuals who are less afraid of potential losses or taking risks, or who like being in control, will be more willing to take on responsibility for others. These characteristics, however, did not explain the differing extent of responsibility aversion found in the study participants. Instead they found that responsibility aversion was driven by a greater need for certainty about the best course of action when the decision also had an effect on others. This shift in the need for certainty was particularly pronounced in people with a strong aversion to responsibility.

Theoretical concept for different leadership types

“Because this framework highlights the change in the amount of certainty required to make a decision, and not the individual’s general tendency for assuming control, it can account for many different leadership types”, says lead author Micah Edelson. “These can include authoritarian leaders who make most decisions themselves, and egalitarian leaders who frequently seek a group consensus.”

Literature:

Micah G. Edelson, Rafael Polania, Christian C. Ruff, Ernst Fehr and Todd A. Hare. Computational and neurobiological foundations of leadership decisions. *Science*: August 2, 2018.



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Contacts:

Dr. Micah Edelson
Department of Economics
University of Zurich
Phone: +41 44 634 51 59
E-mail: micah.edelson@econ.uzh.ch

Media Relations

University of Zurich
Tel. +41 44 634 44 67
E-mail: mediarelations@kommunikation.uzh.ch