The side effects of power and the #metoo movement

Aggressive, obstinate men are more likely to seek power and are often preferred as leaders. The #metoo revolution is pushing to change the way managers behave, but research shows that power changes people and not always for the best.

The #metoo movement is having ramifications across the globe, including in Norway. Several Norwegian politicians in leadership positions have been accused of inappropriate behavior towards women or children.

The political world isn’t the only place where sexual harassment is a problem, however. A report from Norway’s Fafo Research Foundation from last year describes how one in five employees in the country’s hotel and restaurant industry and the health care sector have been subjected to sexual harassment at work.

Twenty-six per cent of those who have experienced physical sexual harassment in the hotel and restaurant industry have been harassed by their managers, according to the report.

A side effect of power

Leaders and managers are supposed to take care of their employees. But power can change the way a person behaves, biologist Dag O. Hessen says.

"If power was a prescription drug, it would include warnings of serious potential side effects,” Hessen wrote in his new book "Vi" (We).

He believes that just the act of acquiring power in itself can change people for the worse.

The leader paradox

This is particularly true when it comes to a person’s belief in his or her own excellence and the belief that power gives that person right to do things, writes Hessen. He describes the concept developed by American psychologist Dacher Keltner from the University of California, Berkeley, who calls this the leadership paradox, or the power paradox.

“The power paradox is this: we rise in power and make a difference in the world due to what is best about human nature, but we fall from power due to what is worst,” Keltner writes in his book, “How we gain and lose influence”.

"The people who ought to be leaders by virtue of their empathy and abilities as team-builders often have astonishingly narcissistic qualities," Keltner writes.

The Hubris Syndrome
The British brain researcher and parliamentarian Lord David Owen describes some of the same issues in what he calls the Hubris Syndrome.

Hessen writes that research shows that leaders often have weakened activity in an area of the brain associated with reflection. That is, they are not able to read the feelings of others based on facial expressions as well as other individuals who had less power.

It seems that being isolated on the top of the pyramid for a long time may weaken the ability of a leader to realize that he or she has something in common with workers further down in the hierarchy, writes Hessen in his book.

Hessen argues that this problem is reminiscent of what is seen in societies where there are deep class divisions. In this situation, people with the greatest wealth and privilege are unable to understand what it’s like for the many who live under much more challenging conditions.

**Hormones and hierarchy**

Hessen writes that there is an interaction between genes, hormones and the environment that helps determine if we want to be leaders and pursue power.

Genes regulate a cocktail of hormones that relate to self-image and thus to the kind of work we seek.

Research shows that managers have clear prevalence of gene variants that encode hormones and neurotransmitters related to risk-seeking, authority and aggression, but also care.

High levels of dopamine, serotonin, adrenaline and testosterone are key hormones related to determination, will and dogged perseverance, Hessen has said.

Along with low levels of the stress hormone cortisol, these are part of the ideal mix of qualities for a leader.

"But whether or not they become good leaders is another matter. Different situations require different leaders,” Hessen points out.

**Head hunters prefer men's persistence**

Psychologist Dacher Keltner was recently in Davos during the World Economic Forum, and was on a panel during a seminar on sexual harassment.

He believes that there is a connection between sexual harassment and the lack of women in senior management.

Men are basically more risky, more aggressive and competitive than women. If they gain power, these same tendencies are easily amplified, according to Keltner.

It is precisely the characteristics of persistence and willingness to take risks that bosses, directors and headhunters embrace in the hunt for top leadership. Peggy Johnson, who is in the top management in Microsoft, says that we have also magnified this by selecting aggressive individuals for in leadership roles.

**References:**

A number of studies show that leaders often have narcissistic tendencies and can be arrogant. Power should come with a warning label that alerts people about these side effects, says biologist and author Dag O. Hessen. (Illustrative photo: Shutterstock)

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