Good leaders adapt their leadership style to the organisation's social context

blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2016/02/02/good-leaders-adapt-their-leadership-style-to-the-organisations-social-context/

"I believe that there will ultimately be a clash between the oppressed and those that do the oppressing. I believe that there will be a clash between those who want freedom, justice and equality for everyone and those who want to continue the systems of exploitation."

— *Malcolm X*

"A genuine leader is not a searcher for consensus but a molder of consensus."

— *Martin Luther King Jr.*

In the above quotations two influential leaders present very different models for advancing intergroup relations in the context of attempts to promote equality in 1960s USA. On the one hand, Malcolm X advocates a conflictual strategy but, on the other, Martin Luther King Jr. argues for conciliation. In their different ways, each leader was also highly successful and admired. The question that this raises relates to the conditions under which these different models of leadership win support. More specifically, when and why do we endorse a leader who champions conflict over one who champions consensus?

In a recent research paper we argue that leaders will adapt their leadership style according to the social context in which their organisation is operating. This idea is based on the proposition that it is not a fixed set of personality traits that assures good leadership but how the leader is representing the nature of the group she is leading (Haslam, Reicher & Platow, 2011). Leaders who adopt this strategy must try not only to fit with their group but also shape the group's identity in a way that makes their own agenda appear to be an expression of that identity. Further, managing groups and leaders identity does not only depend on their own group but also on how their own group stands in relation to another group. Effective leadership is than understood as involving the interplay between specific leadership strategies, prevailing relationships between groups, and followers' reaction. Thus, in our research we asked how the standing of one's group vis-à-vis another group and the prevalence of these relations impact on followers' perception of the best leadership strategy to maintain the groups' identity.

Across three experimental studies in different settings (politically active students and among employees in the retail industry), we found that followers are responsive to leadership strategies that are sensitive to the intergroup setting in which the groups operate. In particular, a competitive leadership style was endorsed when an organization of 'lower status' (hence, having less prestige or power in a prevailing intergroup setting) sees a chance for social change and can challenge the groups standing vis-à-vis another group (see Figure 1 for results Study 1). Across the studies we found these differences to be consistent and of medium-size (d=.77; 95% CI: [.06-1.48]). For the high-status groups we found that a competitive leader was more likely to be endorsed when their status position was *not* likely to change and they didn't have to appease their proponent (see Figure 1 for results Study 1).

Figure 1. Results for competitive leader; *N*=55 members of Conservative Youth.

3-way interaction: $F(1, 51) = 7.03$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2_p = .12$, $r = .36$

Interaction: $F(1, 51) = 7.64$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2_p = .13$
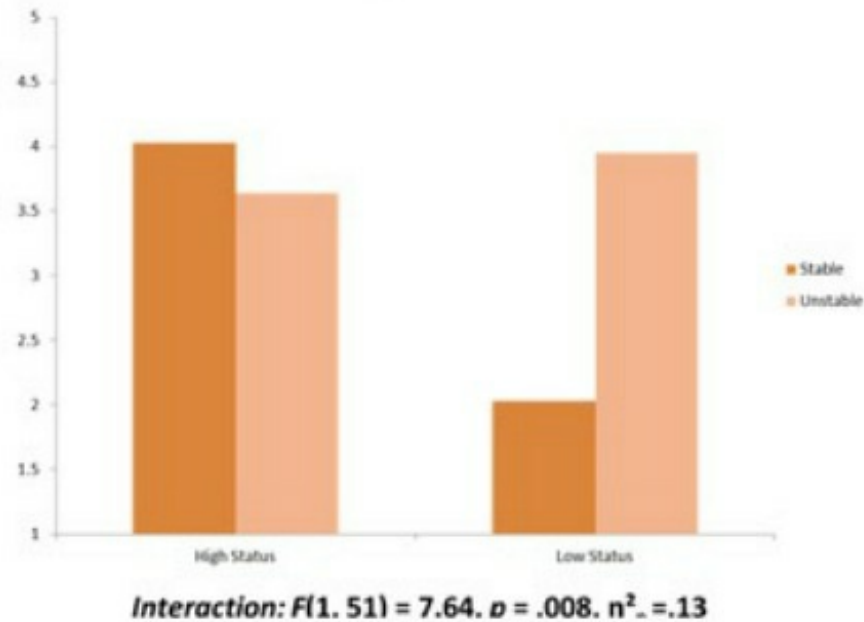
The present findings highlight the importance of understanding leadership and leader-follower relations as a process that occur both within and across groups and organizational boundaries (Hogg, van Knippenberg and Rast III, 2012). Importantly, our work highlights that followers' understanding of the social context will have a major bearing on their willingness to support conflictual (or co-operative) leadership, and that this understanding will thereby constrain leaders' ability to pursue this strategy.

Successful leaders need to adjust their strategies towards relevant outgroups as a function of the particular circumstances that they and their in-group confront. That is, they have to manage inter- and intragroup relations simultaneously to stay in power. Specific leaders and specific strategies are thus not universally successful but have to be attuned the prevailing environment and if our quest is for leadership that is less conflictual, then we need to ensure that we create social realities in which conflictual leadership makes less sense for the group members who would be inspired by it.

♣♣♣

Notes:

- *This post is based on the paper Gleibs, Ilka H. and Haslam, S. Alexander (2016) Do we want a fighter? The influence of group status and the stability of intergroup relations on leader prototypicality and endorsement. The Leadership Quarterly . ISSN 1048-9843*

- *This post gives the views of its author, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*

- *Featured image credit: Don DeBold CC-BY-2.o*

Ilka Gleibs is an Assistant Professor in Social and Organisational Psychology at Department of Social Psychology at the London School of Economics. Her main research focus is on understanding the consequences of multiple social identities, changes in (of) social identities and well-being and on a social identity perspective on leadership.