

# THE INVISIBLE HAND OF GROUP LEADERSHIP

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## Executive Summary

Michigan Ross Professors Scott DeRue and Sue Ashford have researched topics related to effective group leadership and productivity. A recent paper, written with Jennifer Nahrgang of Arizona State University, compares performances of groups with centralized leadership with those in which leadership is more distributed. They also explore the impact of participants' perception of other group members, including issues of warmth and competence. Based on their research, they offer practical suggestions to assist groups in improving results.

# Patterns of Leadership

Research by Professors Scott DeRue and Sue Ashford shows how everyday interactions shape group leadership, and why you should spread that leadership around.

Ever work with a group of peers and somebody, seemingly naturally, takes charge and becomes the de facto leader?

Or did your group spread the leadership around, with different members stepping up at different times?

Research by Professors Scott DeRue and Sue Ashford shows that patterns in group leadership — whether that leadership is centralized or shared — don't just happen by accident. Group members' everyday interactions with each other and their feelings about those interactions determine the pattern of leadership that emerges in the group.

And it turns out a group's leadership pattern matters. In project groups where a centralized pattern of leadership emerges — in which one or two members assume most leadership roles, rather than a single appointed leader — clients rate the group's performance more poorly.

Those are key findings in their paper **“Interpersonal Perceptions and the Emergence of Leadership Structures in Groups: A Network Perspective,”** written with Jennifer Nahrgang of the Carey School of Business at Arizona State University, and published in *Organizational Science*.

It's timely information, since it's becoming more common for groups of peers to tackle specific projects or problems without close supervision.

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“When we start interacting as a group, our actions and reactions to each other, over time, create a pattern of leadership,” says Ashford, the Michael & Susan Jandernoa Professor of Management and Organizations. “We often think of the leadership pattern that emerges as something we do not control, but our study shows that it is our actions and reactions to others that define how leadership unfolds in our groups.”

DeRue says much of the prior research looked at the amount of leadership in a group, but not why different patterns of leadership emerged.

“Most think of the group structure as stable and the leadership fixed,” says DeRue, Edward J. Frey Dean of the Stephen M. Ross School of Business. “But for groups without a formally appointed leader, leadership roles are open to any and all group members. It begs the question of how and why some groups develop a centralized pattern of leadership and other groups share leadership.”

## Warmth and Competence

Their study found the patterns are formed from two main perceptions — warmth and competence. Warmth describes how people view each other’s trustworthiness, likability, and benevolence. Competence describes how people feel about other group members’ ability and skill.

Strong feelings of warmth drive the group toward more of a shared leadership pattern, Ashford says.

“When you have warm feelings about the group, you identify with it more and you feel psychologically safe,” she says. “If you have a lot of people in the group feeling this way, more people are willing to step up and lead in the group.”

A centralized leadership pattern emerges when members of the group differentiate among members' competence. This starts a pattern where group members who are perceived as more competent claim leadership and others grant them the leadership role when they step up.

"It's this system of claiming and granting that reinforces a centralized pattern over time," DeRue says. "We tend to affirm those who we view as competent when they step up. The other members often feel relieved because somebody stood up and took the risk of being the leader."

## Sharing Leadership

But there are some problems with the centralized approach. First, Ashford and DeRue found that groups with a strong central leader are rated lower by clients than groups that share leadership responsibilities.

The pattern that leads to centralized leadership also creates a dynamic that can keep women from leadership roles.

"Often when women step up to lead it doesn't get affirmed," Ashford says. "Women are typecast more with warm traits and less so with competence. So other team members are less likely to affirm them when they step into a leadership position."



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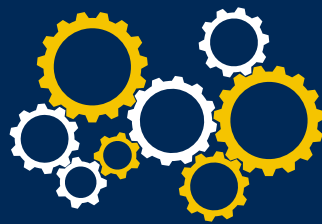
# Information is Power

Helping people understand how these patterns of leadership form in groups will enable people to be more aware and intervene for better results.

Ashford and DeRue suggest some ways managers and employees can nudge teams in a positive direction:

- Select team members not only based on competence, but also trustworthiness and likability. This should strengthen warm feelings among team members from the start, which Ashford says is a critical time. Perceptions in the group are formed early.
- Invest in team-building activities early. Research shows this builds warm feelings among the team when done early.
- Take steps to make sure everyone is perceived as competent, especially when their talents and expertise are in different areas. One reason the centralized pattern takes hold is that people view some as more competent and others less so. Highlight and celebrate the strengths of everyone on the team.
- If you're a manager, come right out and tell employees that teams should share leadership roles when warranted. This is an area where managers can use their authority in a positive way to set norms.
- If you find yourself the de facto group leader, be aware of the dynamic and make sure everyone gets a chance to lead when appropriate. As the recognized leader, you'll field most of the questions and that's a good time to say things like, "Anna is the real expert on this; we'd like her to handle this one."

"We'd like to know more about why groups that share leadership are rated higher," Ashford says. "It could be that with more voices heard, more information is shared. We need more data. But we are very excited about these results on how group leadership patterns emerge and the impact on performance. We can be more aware and act on this knowledge."



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