

Follow the leader

...but at what cost?

LEADERS of all types – of nations, ethnic and religious communities, businesses and teams – often call upon individuals to make sacrifices for the group, especially during wars, recessions, competitions, and other situations in which groups are under threat. At the peak of the Cold War, for example, John F. Kennedy famously stated in his inaugural address: ‘My fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country.’ More recently, Tony Blair announced the war with Iraq by praising the loyalty of the British troops: ‘As so often before, on the courage and determination of British men and women, serving our country, the fate of many nations rests.’ To understand why people are willing to make sacrifices for their groups, sometimes even at the cost of their lives, we must try to comprehend how leaders are able to influence individuals so that they will forgo their immediate interests and act for the greater good of the group.

Most organised groups have some form of leadership structure in place. Leadership can be defined as ‘a process of influence to attain important group, organisational, or societal goals’ (Van Vugt & De Cremer,



MARK VAN VUGT on how leaders can encourage loyalty and sacrifice.

2002, p.155). Leader influence can be targeted at another individual, a subgroup, or group. In groups, leadership is believed to fulfil two primary goals: to complete group tasks, and to fulfil group members’ needs (Cartwright & Zander, 1953). A third, more generic, function of leadership is to promote group integrity – maintaining the group as a viable system (Van Vugt *et al.*, 2004). Indirectly, the integrity of a group is secured through successful task performances and high degrees of member satisfaction. But group integrity is likely to be the *primary* goal of leadership if the group is perceived to be under threat and each member’s loyalty – and often therefore sacrifice – is required.

There are generally two ways in which people can make sacrifices for their groups (Van Vugt, 1998; Van Vugt *et al.*, 2000). People can engage in activities that directly benefit the group but come at a cost to themselves; for example, voluntarily putting in extra hours at work instead of spending it on leisure time – so-called organisational citizenship behaviours (Organ, 1988). Alternatively, they can refrain from activities that benefit themselves but harm the group, for example by rejecting an attractive job offer at a rival firm or, more dramatically, not deserting an army unit during combat.

But how can leaders encourage people to make a group sacrifice? Either by cultivating personal, *intrinsic* motivation, or by appealing to *extrinsic* motivations, whereby the sacrifice becomes a means to achieve a desired personal goal (Deci & Ryan, 1985). We turn to these methods now.

Rewards and threats

In a variety of contexts leaders reward loyalty by promising tangible benefits for sacrificial behaviours – appealing to extrinsic motivations. They may promise promotion to employees who regularly display organisational citizenship behaviours, or pay rises to employees who forgo attractive offers elsewhere. Alternatively, leaders can deter the occurrence of disloyal behaviours, for example by promising to penalise students for non-attendance at seminars or giving fines for antisocial behaviour in residential communities. The most dramatic threat strategy is to actually remove disloyal people from the group (e.g. sacking an insubordinate employee).

Research findings suggest that reward strategies are fairly effective in inducing sacrifice, at least in the short run. Studies with small task groups show that people are more likely to cooperate with leaders who are successful in increasing the

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wealth of the group (Hollander, 1985). Furthermore, organisational studies suggest that citizenship behaviours are more frequent among employees who believe they receive favourable outcomes from the management (Tyler & Blader, 2000).

Threat strategies also seem to work quite well. In our research involving small groups of students working together on a monetary investment task, we found that the amount of money they contributed increased by almost 30 per cent if the leader threatened to fine the least contributing group member (Van Vugt & De Cremer, 1999). Finally, findings of field research indicate that the threat of 'on the spot' fines from the police works quite well in tackling a wide range of antisocial behaviours, such as petty theft, tax evasion, and drunk-driving (Grasmick & Bursik, 1990).

However, there are important drawbacks associated with these incentive strategies. First, these strategies are costly for leaders to operate. Promotions, pay rises, tax breaks and the like all place a heavy burden on the group's resources. Threat tactics are also expensive because they require extensive surveillance and monitoring schemes (although they can sometimes generate new income, as in the example of parking and speeding fines). Leaders must often rely on other individuals to monitor, prosecute, and punish people for being disloyal. However, whether these others can be trusted to remain loyal themselves and do their job will always be a problem – *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* (Who shall watch the watchers?).

Second, leaders who employ such tactics may effectively drive out any *intrinsic* motivation that people have to sacrifice for the group – the activity is not the means to an end, but the end in itself (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Receiving rewards for certain activities (e.g. taking on an admin job in a university department) may not encourage people to think more broadly what they can do to help the group. Similarly, a system of threats may erode the social cohesion within a group, because it signals to people that they can no longer trust each other to work for the group voluntarily. As an illustration, introducing penalties for students who arrive late for tutorials may convey that the problem is worse than it really is, perhaps leading other students to follow the bad example.

Group identification

How might leaders elicit loyalty in the absence of rewards or threats? An intrinsic motivation to sacrifice for groups may stem from two different sources: one's own personality, or group orientation. Some people are simply more likely to comply with requests from leaders than others – this has been labelled the 'authoritarian' personality (Altemeyer, 1998). Differences in authoritarianism have been attributed to genetic dispositions, childhood experiences, and cultural influences. As these differences are relatively stable, leaders must look for other ways to induce sacrifice.

The solution may lie in the identification of members with their group. Human beings have a pervasive drive to learn from, identify with, and sacrifice for groups to which they have strong emotional ties. In particular this 'need to belong' (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) is fuelled by the presence of competing outgroups. Research in the social identity tradition (Abrams & Hogg, 1999; Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) found, for example, that when collections of strangers are divided into two groups on the basis of

'group members trust and identify more with internally recruited leaders'

a trivial criterion such as the flip of a coin, ingroup favouritism and outgroup rejection emerge spontaneously. Furthermore, a salient outgroup increases people's willingness to sacrifice for their ingroup (De Cremer & Van Vugt, 1999; Ellemers *et al.*, 1997; Van Vugt, 2001).

What are the origins of this pervasive tendency to associate with ingroups and discriminate against outgroups? According to evolutionary logic, human society has tended to be organised around small bands of individuals. It is therefore quite likely that natural selection has favoured the evolution of behavioural and emotional predispositions to maintain primary social groups, even at some cost to the individual (Caporael & Brewer, 1991). These social groups that were essential for communal food sharing, child rearing, and territory defence presumably contained both kin and non-kin members. Hence, there must have been mechanisms by which people were able to recognise whether someone belonged to their ingroup or not. Against

this background, group identification may have developed as a quick and easy way to form emotional attachments with other group members and engage in various collective actions to protect the group.

There are two main ways in which leaders can use this evolved tendency of people to identify with groups (De Cremer & Van Vugt, 2002). *Within* the group, a leader must be seen to protect people's status positions so that they feel valued and respected members of this group. *Between* groups, a leader must be seen to foster the status position of the whole group and protect the group boundaries. I will now outline factors that, according to our research and that of others, influence the effectiveness of leadership in promoting group identification and group loyalty – through securing either the status of the entire group or the individual status within the group.

Protecting the status of the group and its members

In our research, undergraduate students came to the laboratory in small groups to participate in a group investment task. They were seated in separate cubicles with a computer and received instructions from a group leader (a confederate of the experimenter) via the computer. We induced members' group identification by stating that their group consisted entirely of students from the University of Southampton and that they were competing with students from other universities. They were asked whether they wanted to invest their money (which they had received as an endowment) in the group to share with other group members. This was the sacrifice measure. The pay-offs were such that if enough people in the group invested their money, the shared outcomes for all people were higher. Yet it was attractive for people to keep their endowment in the group – this type of disloyal behaviour is called 'free riding' (Olson, 1965). We varied the information that people received from and about the leader to investigate the effects of leadership on sacrifice.

Internal or external leader? If the leaders were believed to be ingroup members (i.e. from the University of Southampton), individuals showed more loyalty to them than to leaders recruited from outside the group (Van Vugt & De Cremer, 1999). Apparently, group members

trust and identify more with internally recruited leaders, perhaps because they have shown their group commitment in the past, which enhances their power position in the group (Hollander, 1985).

Furthermore, especially in between-group conflicts, people may fear that outsiders act as 'spies' for rival groups. Remember the 2002 World Cup football finals? When England were playing Sweden, some English tabloids were expressing concerns regarding the loyalty of the England manager, Sven-Goran Eriksson, a Swedish national.

Representative or non-representative leader?

Members are more likely to elect and follow leaders who are representative members of the group in terms of attitudes and opinions, rather than leaders whose opinions are extreme (Hogg, 2001). For example, candidates for political party leadership are more likely to win the contest if their opinions and values show a greater correspondence to the values and opinions of the 'average' party member. This might explain why, at the 2001 Conservative Party election, Iain Duncan Smith was preferred to Michael Portillo and Ken Clarke – the more liberal candidates, who arguably would have been more appealing to the general electorate.

Committed or uncommitted leader?

People were more loyal to leaders if there was evidence that the leaders themselves showed a willingness to sacrifice for the group (De Cremer & Van Vugt, 2002). A real-world illustration of this phenomenon is the presidential elections of Nelson Mandela in South Africa and Václav Havel in the Czech Republic. Both were dissidents to their regimes who showed a strong commitment to their country by suffering prison sentences for their political beliefs. No one could doubt their integrity when they ran for office.

Surprisingly, our research also suggests that a strong commitment from the leader is more effective in eliciting sacrifice from members than the possession of traditional leadership qualities, such as communication and planning skills. In our research (De Cramer & Van Vugt, 2002) we found that individuals cooperated more with committed leaders than with leaders who showed excellent leadership qualities on a standard leadership skills test. Hence, it would be advisable for management recruiters to test candidates on their

potential group commitment as this might increase their influence within the organisation.

Elected or appointed leader? Leaders can be recruited either through external appointment or through election. Our research suggests that the recruitment method of the leader is a major factor in sacrifice (De Cremer & Van Vugt, 2002). Group members were more willing to sacrifice for their leader if they had a say over who would be leading the group (even if their favourite person was not elected). Electing a leader can be a long and tedious process, but it seems to pay off when groups need to rely on each member's sacrifices to survive (such as in a war).

Democratic or autocratic leadership style? The way leaders interact with group members also has implications for sacrifice. A distinction can be made between three dominant behavioural styles: autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire (Bass, 1990). Although autocratic leaders can force individuals to make group sacrifices, they probably cannot sustain this strategy for long, because their leadership style is likely to make people reconsider the value of their group membership. As an illustration, we found that autocratically led groups, in which leaders forced their members to cooperate, lost approximately 50 per cent of members when we gave people the option to move to a different, leaderless group, compared with a 10 per cent loss in democratically led and laissez-

faire led groups (Van Vugt *et al.*, 2004). Outside the laboratory, such mass exits are probably one of the reasons that dictatorial regimes are not very successful in the long run.

Procedurally consistent or inconsistent leadership?

Leaders who made a promise to group members and then broke it quickly lost their influence (De Cremer & Van Vugt, 2002). When group members feel that they are treated disrespectfully – and subsequently experience a decline in their status position – they may no longer feel obliged to cooperate with the leader's objectives. Not surprisingly, the perceived procedural unfairness from management is a key reason for employee turnover (Tyler & Blader, 2000).

Praise or punishment? We discovered that when group members received praise from the leader, in the form of an encouraging e-mail message ('I trust each member to make a contribution'), this positively influenced their self-esteem and their willingness to sacrifice for the group (Van Vugt & De Cremer, 1999). However, a 'threat' style leader who promised to punish people for their disloyalty ('I will penalise any members who do not contribute') was just as influential.

Implications

Generally speaking, our research suggests that rather than through individualised systems of reward and threat, leaders may build upon the collective experience of

feelings of shared group membership in heterogeneous groups than in homogeneous groups. In ethnically diverse groups, identification with a subgroup may be stronger than with the superordinate group. It is therefore paramount for leaders to develop a consensual leadership style so that each individual, or subgroup member, believes that their opinions matter and that their norms and values are reflected in the leader's position on important issues.

This may help us to understand why it is still very difficult for a minority member to become a group leader in our society. Leaders are more effective in demanding sacrifices if they are regarded to be representative group members themselves in terms of their norms and values (Hogg, 2001). In order to be influential they must display opinions and behaviours that most group members share, which may require a long assimilation process. Alternatively, through their past actions, they must have gained a reputation as a committed group member themselves, but this is arguably more difficult for relatively 'new' group members.

There is perhaps better news for women leaders. As leaders, women have been found to be more democratic in their decision-making style than men, who often lead in a more autocratic manner (Eagly *et al.*, 1992). Hence, women leaders should be better able to encourage members to sacrifice for and stay loyal to their group.

Finally, can the findings from the study of leadership in small groups be generalised to larger groups, such as communities and countries? Unlike what the speeches of the Blairs and Kennedys of this world suggest, it may be difficult for leaders and politicians to demand sacrifices for larger social units, such as nation states, because the primary social ties that people have are with their family, their peer group, or residential community. Moreover, national loyalties may conflict with loyalties to these smaller social units. What, for example, would the parents of British soldiers think about a government that sends their children to war in Iraq? Interestingly, when leaders wish to promote sacrifice for a bigger, national cause they often appeal to people's identification with smaller units, so that a war becomes a conflict between 'how we live our lives and how they want to destroy it'; economic sacrifices are justified by referring to 'the future of our children'; and moral sacrifices by 'the fundamental importance of the family'.

That such appeals can persuade us to make sacrifices, even for quite abstract causes, shows once more how leaders may be able to exploit our fundamental need to belong. Let this be a warning.

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group membership by raising and sustaining members' identification with the group. They can do this by raising the status of individuals within the group, or the status of the entire group relative to others.

This analysis has some far-reaching implications for the role of leadership in a rapidly changing society, like the UK. One of the major trends in our society is an increasing diversity in the ethnic composition of neighbourhoods, schools, businesses and work teams. It is arguably more difficult for leaders to develop

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