

Does power make you mean?



Darth

Vader I could live with. At least you knew where you stood with him. Not Jabba. One minute you're a trusted member of the gang, the next minute he flips a switch and you're down in the pit with a blood-thirsty [Rancor](#). I had a CEO who was just like that.

Jabba the Hutt, 'Star Wars: Return of the Jedi'

["Thinking Business"](#) focuses on the psychology of getting ahead in the workplace by exploring techniques to boost employee performance, increase creativity and productivity.

(CNN) -- We all know the story. Someone gets promoted at work and suddenly they change -- they start forgetting their previous peers or turning into bullies.

As it turns out, it may be in our wiring.

In one of the first studies to make this claim, scientists now say a default brain mechanism may cause us to lose empathy when we gain power.

"This research is important because it opens the door to examining what power does to us," says [Sukhvinder Obhi](#), senior author of the study at [Wilfrid Laurier University](#) in Canada. "We have very little understanding of how power affects the brain, both in terms of the neural causes and consequences."

Specifically, the study showed that when you put people in a state where they feel more powerful, their sensitivity to other people dropped, including their ability to put themselves in other peoples shoes.

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"So if someone is promoted, you might see a reduced processing of people, a forgetting of names, or not knowing individual members of staff," says Obhi. "Being powerful might cause your brain to blot over those details."

The Science

In the early 1990s a group of scientists studying monkeys found that their brains reacted in similar ways whether they were grasping an object, or watching someone else grasp an object. In the same way, when human beings see another person pick up an apple or perform an action, they naturally imagine themselves being in their situation. The process is known as our mirroring system -- and has been linked to our feelings of empathy.

Obhi and his team found feelings of increased powerfulness shut down our mirroring system -- and potentially our empathy -- through a default mechanism in our brains.

[Liza Aziz-Zadeh](#), assistant professor at the University of Southern California, studies empathy from a neuroscience perspective and says the findings are interesting. "People who activate their mirroring system more, also score higher on empathy."

She adds that the more similar or relevant a person is to you in trait or grouping, the higher the empathy. "In relation to this study, it may be that the leaders simply don't see

themselves as similar to others," she says.

"The fact that powerful people don't mirror very much is consistent with studies that show powerful people can be more superficial," says Obhi.

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"Their system is less interested in others, which means they do not pay attention to individual difference. This means they may tend to stereotype or categorize people based on superficial surface attributes."

A good excuse for bad behavior?

Empathetic managers are more effective at their job.

Dr. William Gentry

Whether or not the effects of power on people can be regulated is the next step in Obhi's research. But, he speculates that if people can be reminded of their interdependence on other people, it is a possibility.

Aziz-Zadeh agrees. "Things like compassion training can make a huge difference in empathy responses."

[William Gentry](#), senior research scientist at the [Center for Creative Leadership](#) in the U.S. says that not only can you train it -- empathy pays off.

In a 2011 study involving more than 6,000 managers from 38 countries, Gentry concluded that managers who rate higher on empathy also rate higher on performance. "Empathetic managers are more effective at their job," he says, adding that empathy is one of the top competencies for effective leadership.

"What we have found is that when people get power and move up, but don't understand how to relate, don't communicate well, and appear insensitive, cold, and authoritarian --

that ultimately derails their careers," he says. This comes at an enormous cost in time, money, and morale to companies, he adds.

"In practical terms, this type of research may eventually be used and put together with training programs like mindfulness training and educational workshops for executives to deal with power better," says Obhi, but adds that we are only just beginning to understand the effects of power.

"Power has an interesting effect on our mirror system, but we need a ton of experiments to understand more," he says. "This study is one of the first to look at brain mechanisms and power. Beyond that it really opens many more interesting questions than answers."