

**THE DOWNSIDE OF LOOKING LIKE A LEADER:  
LEADERS' POWERFUL DEMEANOR STIFLES FOLLOWER VOICE IN  
PARTICIPATIVE DECISION-MAKING**

CONNORSON C. LOCKE  
London School of Economics  
Department of Management  
London WC2A 2AE

CAMERON ANDERSON  
University of California, Berkeley

**ABSTRACT**

Leaders are often encouraged to exhibit a “leader-like” demeanor to enhance their image and effectiveness. However, the current investigation reveals an unintended consequence of looking like a leader: the stifling of follower voice in participative decision making interactions. This phenomenon was examined in two laboratory studies. Study 1 assigned participants to leader-follower dyads who worked on a decision making task together. Study 2 helped establish causality by manipulating the leader’s demeanor through the use of a research confederate; it also tested the mediating effects of perceived leader competence and threat. We found that, in participative decision making, the effect of the leader’s demeanor on follower voice was mediated by perceived leader competence. In other words, while leaders who exhibit a powerful demeanor may boost their appearance of competence, they also risk stifling follower voice precisely because they appear more competent.

**INTRODUCTION**

Nowadays, understanding how to maximize the effectiveness of participative leadership is more important than ever: Organizations need employee participation to adapt to changes in today’s fast-paced competitive environment (Ashmos, Duchon, McDaniel, & Huonker, 2002) and a new generation of followers demand participative leadership (Maccoby, 2007). In fact, the majority of organizations and leaders already use some form of participative decision making (Bass & Bass, 2008; Fenton-O’Creevy, 1998; Ledford & Lawler, 1994). Therefore, researchers have moved away from comparing participative and directive styles of leadership to exploring contingencies influencing the effectiveness of a participative style. Studies have found, for example, that the effectiveness of participative decision making increases when it is used for tactical rather than strategic decisions (Sagie & Koslowsky, 1994), when middle manager resistance to employee participation is minimized (Fenton-O’Creevy, 1998), and when followers are involved in the decision process from beginning to end (Black & Gregersen, 1997).

However, a gap remains in the literature: While participative decision making requires the sharing of decision making power between leaders and followers, rarely does the literature directly tackle issues of power (Strauss, 1982). In particular, psychological research has revealed that occupying a high-power (leader) versus low-power (follower) position can have a strong influence on individuals’ behavior in their interactions with others (see Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003 for a review). Therefore, the power dynamics inherent in participative decision making interactions might determine the success or failure of the decision making process.

Little empirical attention has been given to leader and follower behavior during participative decision making, perhaps because it requires a degree of access that few

organizations are likely to grant; that is, allowing researchers to observe actual decision making interactions. One way to examine such interactions, however, is through organizational simulations in laboratory settings. The current research fills a gap in the literature by using laboratory simulations of participative decision-making interactions and examining individuals' behavior. It makes an important theoretical contribution by identifying a contingency that has not been previously studied, yet is likely to affect most participative decision making interactions: the leader's nonverbal behavior during those interactions.

### **The Importance of the Leader's Powerful Demeanor**

Among practitioners, the leader's nonverbal style is considered an essential part of leadership effectiveness. In particular, leaders are encouraged to convey a powerful image through their nonverbal behavior, which helps project competence and confidence (e.g., Benton, 1993; Bates, 2005; Lubar & Halpern, 2004). Thus, textbooks teach the importance of nonverbal style to students who aspire to be leaders (e.g., Fritz et al., 2005; Howell & Costley, 2006), and handbooks given to members of the military formally emphasize the importance of nonverbal style to their leadership effectiveness (U.S. Marine Corps, 1995).

Despite the importance of nonverbal style to the practice of leadership, there is a dearth of research examining the effect of leaders' nonverbal behavior on organizational outcomes (Riggio, 2005). A notable exception is the research on charismatic leadership in which researchers found that using high-power nonverbal behaviors enhanced perceivers' judgments of leaders' charisma and effectiveness – even more than the content of the leader's speech or reported performance of the organization (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999; Holladay & Coombs, 1993, 1994). Research on status in groups has also found that individuals who used nonverbal behaviors associated with power were considered more competent, to have better leadership ability, and were given more influence on joint decisions than those who did not (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009; Driskell, Olmstead, & Salas, 1993; Ridgeway, 1987).

Aside from these studies, there is little else to aid our understanding of how the nonverbal behavior of leaders affects organizational outcomes. In the current research, we contribute to the leadership literature by not only focusing on an under-examined aspect of leadership but also by proposing a downside to this high-power nonverbal style, which we label a *powerful demeanor* because of its association with power. Because the aforementioned studies were consistent in the nonverbal behaviors they manipulated, and because all of those behaviors are associated with power (Hall et al., 2005), we use those behaviors to define a powerful demeanor: frequent eye contact, upright posture, dynamic gestures, easily audible voice, confident tone, and fluid speech.

### **Perceived Leader Task Competence**

While leaders' powerful demeanor can enhance their image among their followers, it might also impede communication from followers making them less likely to express their ideas, opinions, and attitudes. One reason for this may be because a powerful demeanor makes the leader appear more competent and knowledgeable.

The literature on emergent leadership has found that in group decision making, each group member's perceived task competence plays an important part in determining how much control they are afforded by others. In order to help the group succeed at a joint task, group members assess each other's task competence and grant status and influence to the individuals with the highest perceived ability (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972; Driskell & Mullen, 1990). Individuals who perceive others to be superior in competence speak less and allow others to make more of the decisions for the group (Anderson, Srivastava, Beer, Spataro, & Chatman, 2006).

That is, to benefit collective success, those with relatively lower perceived ability inhibit their own contributions and voice. Nonverbal behavior, attire, and style of speaking are all easily observable characteristics that tend to be used in making assessments of competence (e.g., Elsbach and Kramer, 2003). Individuals who exhibit nonverbal behaviors associated with power are, as a result, perceived to be more competent (Fisek, Berger, & Norman, 2005; Ridgeway, Berger, & Smith, 1985). Therefore, we expected that leaders who exhibit a powerful demeanor should be judged as more task competent by followers. Accordingly, followers who work with leaders that display a more powerful demeanor should speak less in the participative decision-making interaction.

*Hypothesis 1. The more powerful the leader's demeanor, the more it will stifle follower voice.*

*Hypothesis 2a. The effect of the leader's powerful demeanor on follower voice will be mediated by the follower's perception of the leader's task competence.*

### **Perceived Leader Threat**

Another potential explanation for why a leader's powerful demeanor might stifle follower voice is the perception of threat it instills in followers. Research on voice has found that followers most frequently cite their fear of negative consequences as the reason for staying silent (e.g., Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003; Ryan & Oestereich, 1991). However, prior studies that have examined the role of fear have focused on discretionary voice; that is, voice initiated by the follower. In participative decision making, voice is invited by the leader, which may make feelings of threat less important a factor.

Nonetheless, simply occupying a less powerful position makes one more likely to perceive threat and feel threatened (Keltner et al., 2003). For example, in one study individuals assigned to a low-power position significantly overestimated the magnitude of the high-power person's threatening emotions directed toward them (anger, contempt, disgust; Anderson & Berdahl, 2002). And feeling low in power can heighten feelings of anxiety (Keltner et al., 2003; Kramer & Hanna, 1988). Thus it is possible that even in participative decision making interactions, leaders' powerful demeanor may heighten feelings of threat. In particular, it might make the follower feel even less powerful and thereby reduce follower voice.

*Hypothesis 2b. The effect of the leader's powerful demeanor on follower voice will be mediated by the follower's perception of the leader's threat.*

### **The Leader's Powerful Demeanor and Follower Deference**

In addition to examining the impact of leaders' demeanor on followers' voice, we sought to examine its effect on the decision outcome. Group members who exhibit a powerful demeanor have a stronger influence on their group's final decision than those who do not (Driskell et al., 1993; Ridgeway, 1987). Thus leaders using a powerful demeanor should have a stronger influence on the decision outcome; in other words, their powerful demeanor would make followers more likely to defer to them. Follower deference would have a detrimental effect on decision outcomes in those situations where the leader's view is incomplete or misinformed – presumably not uncommon in participative decision making, hence the need for follower participation. If, as suggested earlier, the follower also speaks less and shares less information, then decision performance is likely to suffer.

To explain how the leader's powerful demeanor might encourage follower deference, we examined the same two mechanisms described above: perceived leader task competence and perceived leader threat. If a powerful demeanor makes the leader appear more competent, then

followers may be more likely to defer because they are convinced the leader's view is correct. If a powerful demeanor makes the leader appear more threatening, then followers may be more likely to defer out of fear of retribution.

*Hypothesis 3: The more powerful the leader's demeanor, the more likely the follower will be to defer to the leader in a joint decision.*

*Hypothesis 4a: The effect of the leader's powerful demeanor on follower deference will be mediated by the follower's perception of the leader's task competence.*

*Hypothesis 4b: The effect of the leader's powerful demeanor on follower deference will be mediated by the follower's perception of the leader's threat.*

In summary, we hypothesize that, in participative decision making, the leader's powerful demeanor will stifle follower voice and encourage deference, and that perceived leader task competence and/or perceived leader threat will mediate these effects. We conducted two laboratory studies that involved organizational simulations to test these hypotheses.

### **STUDY 1**

Study 1 sought to establish the basic phenomenon: that the leader's powerful demeanor stifles follower voice. Participants were 86 undergraduates who were randomly paired into dyads to work on an organizational decision-making task together; within the dyad they were assigned to either the role of leader or follower. Because the power wielded by leaders in organizations is characterized by legitimacy (French & Raven, 1959) and resource control (Fiske & Berdahl, 2007) inherent in the formal leadership position (Bass & Bass, 2008), we provided leaders with legitimacy by suggesting they had more work experience than followers (see Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Bass & Bass, 2008), and resource control by placing leaders in charge of distributing a cash prize to followers. Dyads were videotaped to allow for behavior coding.

Powerful demeanor was measured using leaders' eye contact, posture, and vocal volume, combined with an overall rating of the powerfulness of their nonverbal style. Voice was measured as speaking time. The results provided support for Hypothesis 1: the more the leader used a powerful demeanor, the less the follower contributed to the decision-making discussion. These findings were bolstered by the fact that leaders and followers behaved consistently with previous research: followers spoke less than leaders, and leaders used more powerful nonverbal behaviors than followers. Furthermore, the findings held regardless of the sex of the supervisor.

### **STUDY 2**

In Study 2, to establish causality, we used a research confederate as the leader and systematically varied his demeanor across conditions. Second, we used a measure of voice that included content of communication (decision-relevant information shared) as well as volume of speech. Third, we used a decision-making task with objectively right and wrong answers, to demonstrate that the effect of leaders' demeanor on follower voice can diminish decision quality. Fourth, we tested our remaining hypotheses regarding follower deference and the two potential mediating effects of perceived task competence and perceived threat.

Participants were 75 undergraduates who engaged in a decision making task with a male research confederate who played the role of supervisor and was blind to the hypotheses. The decision making task was adapted from Peterson (2001) which involved choosing the best of three candidates for a CFO position. Participants were provided with a diverse set of information about each candidate. Two candidates were relatively highly qualified whereas one candidate was clearly less qualified than the other two. The supervisor (i.e., the confederate) was trained to always choose the least qualified candidate. Therefore a poor joint decision would result if

subordinates deferred to the supervisor's decision. The supervisor opened the discussion by stating his preferred candidate and asking the participant for input. The confederate was trained to remain firm in his choice, but also to avoid pressuring the subordinate to defer, making it clear that choosing "undecided" was acceptable. The dyads were given 10 minutes for discussion and were videotaped while working together.

This study replicated the findings from Study 1 but also extended them in important ways. As in Study 1, when the leader exhibited a more powerful demeanor, followers participated less (Hypothesis 1 was supported). However, by using a confederate as the leader, this study was able to better establish the causal priority of the leader's powerful demeanor on follower voice. Furthermore, by using a more comprehensive measure of voice, it showed that when the leader used a powerful demeanor, followers not only spoke less but also shared less task-relevant information and were less persistent. By using a task where decision quality could be measured and by having the confederate argue for the worst choice, this study demonstrated that when the leader used a powerful demeanor, followers were more likely to defer (Hypothesis 3 was supported), even when his choice was the worst one.

This study also shed light on the mediating mechanisms of these effects. The relationship between leader demeanor and follower voice was mediated by perceived task competence, not perceived threat (Hypothesis 2a supported; 2b not supported). Similarly, the effect of leader demeanor on follower deference was mediated by perceived task competence, not perceived threat (Hypothesis 4a supported; 4b not supported). In other words, followers who worked with leaders that displayed a powerful demeanor inhibited their voice and deferred to the leader because they perceived the leader as more competent, not because he seemed more threatening.

It is possible that perceived threat failed as a mediator because we did not create a reasonable degree of threat in the laboratory. However, the difference in perceived threat was significant between the two conditions and, more importantly, in a separate laboratory study in which we examined discretionary voice (as opposed to invited voice), we found that the effect of the leader's powerful demeanor on follower voice was indeed mediated by perceived threat (Locke, 2008). This suggests that it is possible to manipulate threat in the laboratory and that the reason perceived threat was not a mediator in the current research is that we were examining invited, not discretionary, voice in a joint decision making context.

## **GENERAL DISCUSSION**

Our studies are consistent with prior work showing that a powerful demeanor leads to being perceived more positively by others (e.g., Awamleh & Gardner, 1999; Ridgeway, 1987). A powerful demeanor led to being perceived by subordinates as being more competent. However, our studies also showed that when leaders used a powerful demeanor, there was a critical downside: followers spoke less, shared less information, and were more likely to defer to the leader's incorrect decision. Further, the stifling effect of leaders' powerful demeanor on follower voice had a deleterious effect on decision making. In Study 2, even though the candidate the leader had chosen was the worst one, when the leader used a powerful demeanor, followers were more likely to believe that his choice was the best one and defer to his decision. The primary reason why followers deferred to the leaders' poor decision was that they believed him to be more competent. Clearly in these contexts, there was a downside to looking like a leader.

It is important to point out that the two studies used a range of measurement techniques to gauge leaders' demeanor, follower voice, and mediating mechanisms such as perceived leader competence and threat. We used independent observers' judgments based on videotapes to measure leaders' powerful demeanor, follower voice, and followers' expression of unique

information, and used an objective index of decision-making performance, in addition to self-report measures of perceived competence and threat. This methodological diversity lends great confidence that our findings were not due to any shared method variance. Further, rather than rely on vignettes or even pre-recorded segments of a leaders' behavior, we used a trained confederate to play the part of a leader who conveyed a powerful or less powerful demeanor. This provided heightened ecological validity and realism while maintaining the tight control associated with laboratory methods.

This research enriches our understanding of leadership, participative decision making, and voice. First, it helps to fill a gap in the leadership literature by examining the effects of the leader's nonverbal behavior on organizational outcomes, specifically follower voice and participative decision making outcomes. Second, it demonstrates that displaying a powerful demeanor has an important downside – namely, the stifling of follower voice. Third, by using laboratory studies and drawing on the psychological research on power, this research fills a gap in the participative decision making literature by examining the power dynamics affecting joint decision making interactions. Finally, by defining and focusing on the leader's powerful demeanor, this research provides insight into a leadership behavior worthy of attention from scholars in leadership, power, and voice.

These findings have obvious practical implications for leaders who engage in participative decision making. Simply asking a follower for input may not be enough to elicit the participation needed; leaders may be undermining their own efforts through their use of a powerful demeanor. These leaders need to be aware of their own nonverbal style and the unfortunate effect a powerful demeanor can have on follower voice and deference. Because executive coaches and textbooks often teach the importance of a powerful demeanor (e.g., Fritz et al., 2005; Howell & Costley, 2006), it is particularly important that educators incorporate these findings into their programs, making aspiring leaders aware of the downside of a powerful demeanor.

How can leaders enjoy the benefits of a powerful demeanor while avoiding the costs? The solution to this dilemma remains an unanswered question and one that needs to be addressed in future research. Because the follower's perception of the leader's task competence is the mechanism underlying this effect, perhaps a leader who expresses uncertainty or explains why the follower's input is needed can counteract the stifling effects of a powerful demeanor. Asking specific and probing questions could be another method of eliciting information from followers without having to change one's demeanor. Indeed, it may be that there is no single solution and leaders must develop techniques most suited to their natural style.

## **CONCLUSION**

By examining the leader's powerful demeanor as an antecedent to follower voice, the current research revealed a leadership dilemma: the demeanor that leaders are encouraged to use to enhance their image has the critical unintended negative consequence of stifling follower voice. This effect diminishes the effectiveness of participative decision making by reducing the amount of information leaders receive and by making followers too willing to defer to the leader. The major contribution of the current research is identifying the dilemma, the robustness of the effect, and the mechanism by which it operates. An important challenge for future research is to find a solution to this dilemma. In the meantime, simply making leaders aware of the negative consequences of a powerful demeanor is an important step in removing barriers to follower voice.

## **REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE FIRST AUTHOR**