

Leaders take note: Feeling powerful can have a hidden toll

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New research from the University of Florida Warrington College of Business finds that feeling psychologically powerful makes leaders' jobs seem more demanding. And perceptions of heightened job demands both help and hurt powerful leaders.

Trevor Foulk of the University of Maryland Robert H. Smith School of Business and Klodiana Lanaj, Martin L. Schaffel Professor at UF, note that while power-induced job demands are key to helping leaders more effectively pursue their goals and feel that their [jobs](#) are meaningful each day at work, these demands can also cause pain and discomfort, felt in the evening at home.

"Power is generally considered a desirable thing, as leaders often seek power, and it's very rare for leaders to turn powerful roles down," Foulk said. "However, this view is qualified by the fact that

many leaders feel exhausted and overburdened by their work. Our work helps shed light on this paradox, as it helps us understand why leaders might want powerful positions (they achieve more goal progress and feel that their work is more meaningful), but also face substantial consequences (their jobs feel more demanding in a way that causes anxiety and [physical pain](#))."

The study shows that leaders who are higher in neuroticism—a [personality trait](#) that captures one's propensity to worry and to experience stress—are particularly sensitive to both the costs and the benefits that come with feeling powerful at work.

"Neuroticism is generally associated with negative outcomes like stress, job dissatisfaction, and a focus on failures and frustrations," Foulk and Lanaj write. "However, our results demonstrate that neuroticism can strengthen the indirect effect of power on goal progress and meaningfulness, highlighting that neuroticism can also have positive implications for powerful employees at work."

With these findings in mind, Foulk and Lanaj offer options for how leaders and organizations can help powerful employees deal with the negative effects of experienced power—[anxiety](#) and [physical pain](#). For those in positions of power dealing with anxiety, the researchers suggest giving these individuals access to increased [social support](#) and help in developing strategies for dealing with anxiety like practicing mindfulness or participating in stress management programs.

As for reducing physical discomfort and pain, Foulk and Lanaj recommend that organizations consider encouraging powerful leaders to take more breaks during work or providing them with physical resources like ergonomic chairs and office equipment.

"Such strategies may help employees and organizations realize the positive effects of power-

induced job demands, while minimizing or mitigating their negative effects," Foulk and Lanaj write.

Taken together, these findings shed light on nuanced ways that power impacts leaders at work. Leaders feeling burdened by their power are likely to feel like something is awry or that they may just not be up to the task. This may be particularly likely for leaders high in neuroticism, but this work shows that feeling under pressure at work is a natural consequence of feeling powerful. Therefore, managers and organizations should recognize the discordant effects that power has on employees and realize that the experience of [power](#) is neither universally positive nor universally negative for powerholders.

This research is forthcoming in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

Provided by University of Florida

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