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Being proactive alone is not a shortcut to good leadership

New research from the University of Adelaide demonstrates that being proactive could earn an individual a leadership position, but merely being proactive alone does not make for a good leader.

Individuals must be aware of their own leadership competencies to avoid the traps of the Peter Principle, which acknowledges that employees tend to be promoted to leadership positions based on their past performance as employees, not their competence in leading.

The University of Adelaide's Associate Professor Chad Chiu, Adelaide Business School, is lead author on a recently published research paper titled [*Is leader proactivity enough: Importance of leader competency in shaping team role breadth efficacy and proactive performance*](#).

"Proactive individuals are those who initiate change-oriented actions to cope with encountered challenges. In other words, proactive people are not satisfied with merely following the existing protocols to perform their jobs. Instead, they tend to seek new ways to achieve better outcomes," Associate Professor Chiu said.

Previous research has shown a positive correlation between individuals' proactive personalities and their marketability. Proactive employees are usually believed to have 'leader-like' abilities because they can come up with novel ideas to change the status quo.

"The modern business environment is more dynamic and unpredictable than ever, and nowadays being proactive is believed to be an essential leadership quality."

However, Associate Professor Chiu warned that being proactive alone is simply not enough to demonstrate good leadership.

"Our new study provides empirical proof that having a proactive leader does not guarantee the building of a proactive team. When employees are dealing with a proactive yet incompetent leader, they tend to perceive the proposed proactive goals as too risky. They can become pessimistic about their own capabilities to be a proactive team," he said.

"Our data also demonstrates that this type of leader is even worse than a passive and incompetent one, as the passive boss will not consistently generate impractical ideas that cannot be well executed. In addition, proactive leaders may rush to offer assistance that their followers do not need, which undermines the team."

Yet proactive leaders are still a great asset to businesses if those individuals possess corresponding skills and competence to generate constructive outcomes.

"When leaders' proactivity and competence are both high, their teams exhibit a higher level of collective confidence and, as a result, achieve better proactive performance," Associate Professor Chiu said.

"The real issue lies in people's lack of self-awareness regarding their own leadership capabilities. This phenomenon can be attributed to the Dunning-Kruger effect, whereby humans, especially those with low competencies, tend to unconsciously overestimate their abilities."

Studies have shown that although 95 per cent of people think they are self-aware enough to critically evaluate their own performance, in fact only 10-15 per cent actually are. This effect is particularly prominent among organisational leaders who have succeeded in promotion competitions.

Associate Professor Chiu proposes that before granting managers full autonomy to be proactive, organisations should invest in training these managers to ensure they possess the necessary competence to demonstrate 'wise proactivity'.

"Essential leadership competencies, including problem interpretation and analysis, gained via support, coaching, communication, and coordination, can equip managers to successfully execute proactive initiatives. We want to promote the idea of 'wise proactivity' within organisations."

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