

Having less power impairs the mind and ability to get ahead, study shows

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New research appearing in the May issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, suggests that being put in a low-power role may impair a person's basic cognitive functioning and thus, their ability to get ahead.

In their article, Pamela Smith of Radboud University Nijmegen, and colleagues Nils B. Jostmann of VU University Amsterdam, Adam Galinsky of the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, and Wilco W. van Dijk of VU University Amsterdam, focus on a set of cognitive processes called executive functions. Executive functions help people maintain and pursue their goals in difficult, distracting situations. The researchers found that lacking power impaired people's ability to keep track of ever-changing information, to parse out irrelevant information, and to successfully plan ahead to achieve their goals.

In one experiment, the participants completed a Stroop task, a common psychological test designed to exercise executive functions. Participants who had earlier been randomly assigned to a low-power group made more errors in the Stroop task than those who had been assigned to a high-power group. Smith and colleagues also found that these results were not due to low-power people being less motivated or putting in less effort. Instead, those lacking in power had difficulty maintaining a focus on their current goal.

In another experiment, participants were asked to move an arrangement

of disks from a start position to a final position in as few moves as possible, known to researchers as the Tower-of-Hanoi task. This task tests the more complex ability of planning. In some trials there was a catch: participants had to move the first disk in a direction that was opposite to its final position. Low power participants made more errors and required more moves on these trials, demonstrating poor planning.

Smith and colleagues believe their results have “direct implications for management and organizations.” In high-risk industries such as health care, a single employee error can have fatal consequences. Empowering these employees could reduce the likelihood of such errors. Additionally, their work illustrates how hierarchies perpetuate themselves. By randomly assigning individuals to high and low-power conditions, they demonstrate that simply lacking power can automatically lead to performance that reinforces one’s low standing, sending the powerless towards a destiny of dispossession.

Source: Association for Psychological Science

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