

Powerful people feel taller than they are

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After the huge 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the chairman of BP referred to the victims of the spill as the "small people." He explained it as awkward word choice by a non-native speaker of English, but the authors of a new paper published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, wondered if there was something real behind it. In their study, they found that people who feel powerful tend to overestimate their own height—they feel physically larger than they actually are.

"Maybe there's a physical experience that goes along with being powerful," says Jack A. Goncalo of Cornell University, who cowrote the paper with Michelle M. Duguid of Washington University. "For people who are less powerful, maybe other people and objects loom larger, and for the powerful everything else just seems smaller." Plenty of research has shown that taller people are more likely to acquire power; taller people make more money, on average, and are more likely to be promoted. But our research is the first to show the reverse may also be true: power also makes people feel taller.

In one experiment, subjects came to the lab in pairs. First they had their heights measured. Then they were given a leadership aptitude test and told that, based on their feedback, they would each be assigned to play the role of the manager or the employee. They were given fake feedback, then randomly assigned a role. After that, each person filled out a questionnaire with personal information, including eye color and [height](#). People who had been told they would be the manager, with complete control over the work process and power to evaluate the

employee, said they were taller than the actual measurement. The subject who had been told they would be the employee gave a height that was more or less the same as their real height.

Other experiments found similar results—that people who feel powerful overestimate their height. So maybe Carl-Henric Svanberg really did feel taller than the people affected by the Gulf oil spill. The results may also explain why diminutive leaders might still behave like [people](#) twice their height—they actually feel taller.

"Given that height is associated with power, raising your height may make you feel powerful," Goncalo says—which helps explain the continuing popularity of high heels and offices on the top floor.

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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