

Make no mistake - male bosses' errors matter

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What do employees think of their boss when he or she makes a mistake? According to a new study, leaders who make mistakes are seen as less competent, less desirable to work for and less effective than leaders who do not. And if the leader is a man making a mistake in a man's world, he is judged more harshly than a woman making the same mistake in a man's world. The work by Christian Thoroughgood, from the Pennsylvania State University in the US, and his colleagues, is published online in Springer's *Journal of Business and Psychology*.

It is a fact that leaders do make mistakes, and these mistakes can have far-reaching [negative consequences](#). For leaders to be effective, followers must trust their ability to make [difficult decisions](#), execute their initiatives and act as positive organizational figureheads - it is critical that followers see their leaders as competent. So when they get it wrong, followers question their competence and are less willing to follow them and work for them.

Thoroughgood and his colleagues looked at how male and female leaders are rated, not when they succeed, but when they make mistakes. They were particularly interested in whether subordinates would perceive their leaders differently according to the type of [mistake](#) they made and their gender, i.e., a man or a woman working in either a man's world (construction) or a woman's world (nursing).

A total of 284 [undergraduates](#) from a large northeastern university in the US, who had worked on average for nearly three years, read a series of fictional emails describing a leader's behavior. They were asked to

envision themselves as subordinates of the leader - either a man or a woman. In the emails, the leaders made two types of errors: task errors and relationship errors.

The participants then answered an [online survey](#) measuring their [perception](#) of the leader's competence in both task and relationship matters, their desire to work for the leader as well as their opinion of whether the leader was effective or not.

The researchers found that errors did damage perceptions of leaders who commit them. Leaders who made mistakes were viewed as less competent in both task and relationship areas and 'subordinates' were less likely to want to work for them. They were also seen as less effective.

In addition, the authors observed an effect of gender. Male leaders were evaluated more negatively than female leaders for errors made in masculinized work domains. The authors suggest that male leaders may be seen as violating expectations of male performance in this context, whereas women are expected to fail in masculine work settings.

The authors conclude: "Our results suggest that leader errors matter; errors damage perceptions of a leader's competence and follower's desire to work for them. While it is impractical to suggest [leaders](#) should attempt to avoid errors altogether, they should recognize the different types of errors they make and consider how these errors impact their [followers](#) in different ways."

More information: Thoroughgood CN, Sawyer K and Hunter S (2012). Real men don't make mistakes: investigating the effects of leader gender, error type and the occupational context on leader error perceptions. *Journal of Business and Psychology*; [DOI 10.1007/s10869-012-9263-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-012-9263-8)

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