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Expectations can minimize unethical behavior in the powerful

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While there are many examples of unethical leaders, from FIFA to the recent political discoveries from the Panama Papers leak, there are countless other examples, though not as headline grabbing, in history of leaders acting morally. Recent research offers new ideas for curbing unethical behavior by those with power—it all depends on how people in power think about their power.

"We suggest that how today's leaders and managers think about the power they wield can shape how they behave," says lead author Miao Hu (Shidler College of Business, University of Hawai'i at Manoa). "Moreover, focusing the powerful to think about how they should behave may serve as a potential form of preventative medicine against the abuse of power."

Researchers Miao Hu (University of Hawai'i at Manoa), Derek Rucker (Northwestern University), and Adam Galinsky (Columbia University), collaborated on the project. The study is published in the June issue of *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

In a series of three experiments, the authors demonstrated that activating descriptive expectations for power—what others believe people actually do—leads the powerful to cheat more than the powerless, whereas activating prescriptive expectation, or what others believe people should do, leads the powerful to cheat less than the powerless.

The first experiment utilized 202 participants to rate whether a series of

unethical behavior are consistent with their expectations of the powerful or the powerless. While participants thought the powerful would "typically and often behave" unethically, in contrast, they also thought the powerful "should behave" less unethically.

In a second experiment, the researchers manipulated 222 participants' sense of power and types of expectations before measuring their likelihood to engage in unethical behavior. They found those in high power reported higher intentions of unethical behavior than those of low-power when focused on descriptive expectations. This pattern reversed under the prescriptive scenario in that the powerful had less unethical intentions than the less powerful. They replicated this study with another independent sample of participants and found similar results.

The final test involved the opportunity to cheat in a die roll game. 182 college students rolled a die five times for the chance to win a $50 gift card. The higher their roll totals, the more times their name would be entered into a drawing for the gift card. After providing the participants the instructions, the authors allowed the students to report their totals. Analyzing the numbers reported, the authors could determine if the number of successful high rolls was significantly higher than pure chance, which would be a sign of cheating.

While signs of cheating appeared in several of the research groups, there was a noticeable difference for those in the high power conditions. The high power participants in the descriptive condition cheated significantly more than participants in the prescriptive condition.

"When the powerful think about how those with power do behave, such as descriptive expectations, they behave more unethically and cheat more," says Hu. "However, when the powerful think about how those with power should behave, as in prescriptive expectations, they behave more ethically and cheat less."

This prescriptive nature, say the authors, could help leaders.

"First, organizations might lessen the corrupting effects of power by highlighting how the powerful should behave," says Hu, "Leaders can also remind themselves how they should behave to prevent their own misuse of power."

The authors note that this is an initial series of tests. The present research has not tested the influence of such subtle manipulations in real-world environments, nor has it examined such effects for more chronic positions of power.

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