

Do you want a cheerleader or a critic? The Voice shows how we really choose our mentors.

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Rachel Ruttan is an assistant professor of organizational behaviour at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management. She holds a PhD in

Management and Organizations from the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University. Credit: Rachel Ruttan

We think that we will choose our personal and professional advisors based on reasoned criteria about their expertise, competence and experience.

In practice, we go more with our gut than our head, choosing the person who shows enthusiasm for us and our goals. A team of researchers has used the popular singing competition show *The Voice* to prove it.

Now in its 18th season, *The Voice* is a "really extreme version of life," said researcher Rachel Ruttan, an assistant professor of organizational behavior and human resources at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management. Yet the high stakes environment is ideal for studying decision-making.

"For the purposes of the research, it was perfect," said Prof. Ruttan, who worked with Julia Hur of New York University and Catherine Shea of Carnegie Mellon University. "We think that our findings apply to a wide range of contexts and all sorts of advising relationships."

Show contestants first go through "blind auditions," each performing before a panel of four potential coaches whose chairs are turned away from the singer. A [coach](#) signals they're interested in working with a [singer](#) by turning their chair towards them, displaying a message that says, "I want you." Singers and coaches next have a brief on-stage chat. Singers with more than one interested coach must then choose who will coach them for the rest of the multi-stage competition.

The researchers analyzed and coded four early seasons of the show,

finding a significant correlation between the enthusiasm coaches showed for a contestant and the likelihood the contestant would choose them. A coach's track record in coaching other successful contestants played less of a factor.

That result flew in the face of a separate experiment in which the researchers interviewed aspiring contestants while they lined up to apply for a spot on the show. Not yet in the spotlight, those people ranked enthusiasm significantly below experience and expertise in the qualities they would want in a coach. Other lab-based experiments confirmed the "prediction error" between what people say they want in an advisor and the way they ultimately choose them. In another experiment, the researchers also tested how people select advisors for their professional careers.

The findings are useful, said Prof. Ruttan, because quality mentorship has become increasingly important in the pursuit of personal and professional goals. Setting up a checklist of priorities in advance may help people choose job coaches, educational supervisors, [financial advisors](#) and others more wisely.

Besides that, their choice "may actually be consequential for performance," said Prof. Ruttan. In a final experiment, lab volunteers twice sang the popular karaoke song Don't Stop Believin' by Journey, receiving feedback in between from randomly assigned advisors who were also professional musicians. An advisor's enthusiasm made no difference the second time, but singers who got feedback from those with specific expertise in vocal music showed better subsequent performance.

While the research was extremely time-consuming, it ranks among Prof. Ruttan's favorites. "It's not often that you get to include reality TV and karaoke in a single paper," she said.

More information: Julia D. Hur et al, The unexpected power of positivity: Predictions versus decisions about advisor selection., *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* (2020). [DOI: 10.1037/xge0000756](https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000756)

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