

When the Boss Feels Dumb

Ever wonder why people in power sometimes turn aggressive toward their underlings? If they're already in charge, what would make them aggressive? A series of recent studies by psychologists from University of Southern California and University of California at Berkeley suggests that feelings of incompetence by persons in power may fuel aggressive tendencies toward others.

In Study #1 ninety professionals from around the USA were invited to participate in a study while on their computers at their offices. They first indicated on a scale just how much authority they have over other persons in their employment. Then they completed measures of perceived incompetence (Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale) and aggression (Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire). Those who reported a lot of control over other people *and also* scored high on fear of negative evaluation scored higher on the measure of aggression.

In Study #2 ninety-eight professionals were recruited in the same format. Some of the participants were primed to feel powerful by writing about a time when they were in a high power role. Others were asked to write about what they did the day before. Some of each of these groups were asked to further write about a time when they felt especially competent. Others were asked to write about a time when they felt especially incompetent. Next the experimenters asked all four groups (high power-high competence, high power-low competence, low power-high competence, low power-low competence) to select noise blast levels for use in a future learning experiment with other subjects. Participants primed to recall high power but low competence memories chose much higher blast levels than any of the other three groups.

In Study #3 fifty-nine university students were asked to assume the role of teacher to a student who would do various tasks for them. They were then given positive, neutral or negative feedback about their "leadership aptitude." Following this feedback from the researchers some of them were also given a "leadership aptitude test" and told they did quite well, thus boosting their sense of competence. Finally, all the "teachers" were told their "student" partners would be given a chance to win extra money by completing a task. The "teacher" could choose between an easy and a difficult task for the student to complete. Those "teachers" who had been given negative feedback about their leadership ability were much more likely to pick a difficult task for their student partners than those given positive feedback about their leadership. However, those "teachers" given negative feedback but who then were told they did well on the aptitude test for leadership were less likely to pick hard tasks for their students.

In Study #4 one hundred sixty-three professionals were recruited online to describe the specific demands of their jobs after completing a measure of the power level of their jobs. Some of them were also asked to recall a time when they were unable to meet the demands of their jobs. Some of them were then asked to pick a core personal value and write about why that value is important to them (a task that has previously been shown to boost self-worth). All participants then completed the Buss-Perry Aggression

Questionnaire. As you might guess by now, those in high power jobs who recalled a time when they didn't meet the demands of the job very well scored higher on the aggression scale than those who weren't made to remember past incompetence. However, those that wrote self-affirming paragraphs about important personal goals did not score as high on aggression.

So what do these studies tell us about people in power? As the authors put it, "Power holders who do not feel personally competent are more likely than those who feel competent to lash out against other people." There's something about being in charge and not feeling competent that brings out the worst in people. Note also that all it takes to make bosses aggressive is for them to *feel* incompetent, which may occur when they feel criticized or are reminded of a time when they couldn't meet the demands of the job. Those in lower power positions might do well to note when and where their bosses become aggressive. It may be those situations where the high power people tend to feel "over their heads" or just plain incompetent. Some personal affirmation or a little positive feedback might just improve the situation for everyone!

Fast, N.J. & Chen S. When the boss feels inadequate: Power, incompetence, and aggression. 2009. *Psychological Science*. Vol. 20, Pp. 1406-1413.