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Responsibility as a burden: Responsible power-holders experience the highest stress levels

People in high-power positions experience more stress if they are aware of their *responsibility* than if they recognize the freedom their position provides. Research of the Leibniz-Institut für Wissensmedien (IWM) in Tübingen has shown this. If power-holders think about their responsibility (rather than their personal freedom) they do act more fairly towards others – but at the same time, their own stress level rises.

Tübingen, 16 March 2018. A position of power can tempt people to focus primarily on their personal benefits, just as the famous phrase “power corrupts” says. However, this is not always the case. Especially people in high-power positions, like managers or team leaders, are often aware of their responsibility for others. This has positive consequences for others, such as, how fairly power-holders collaborate with and treat their employees. But how does being aware of their responsibility affect the power-holders?

Participants who talked about their responsibilities as a power-holder showed more stress than those who talked about their freedom and opportunities.

The researchers, led by Dr. Annika Scholl of the lab *Social Processes* at the Leibniz-Institut für Wissensmedien, wanted to answer this question. In one of five studies, they invited students to deliver a speech about a personal experience. This experience should include an event in which the participants had experienced power and influence. One group of participants was asked to talk about the *freedom* they had experienced in the situation. The others should recount the *responsibility* they had experienced in this moment. While participants delivered the speech in

front of a camera, the researchers measured their stress level. Using common physiological assessment, they captured indicators for the performance of the heart – an indicator of the stress level participants experienced while recounting their personal experience.

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The experiment showed: Participants who talked about their responsibility exhibited more stress than the ones talking about their opportunity – even though people in both groups experienced the same extent of power and influence. Moreover, these effects only appeared for people *high* in power – a comparison with people low in power showed: Responsibility increased stress among those *high* in power, but not those *low* in power (with the latter also talking about either their freedom or responsibility). In conclusion, it is not responsibility in itself that leads to more stress, but responsibility in combination with a high-power position.

Four additional studies confirmed these findings, including a survey among leaders. “People seemed, in some way, to perceive the responsibility as part of their power position as a burden,” Dr. Annika Scholl says. “This may be because power-holders, here, become aware of all the duties to be fulfilled within such a position. For us, the question remains how power-holders can learn to deal with this in the long-run.” To answer this question, the researchers are working on further research on this topic.

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More information:

Dr. Annika Scholl, Leibniz-Institut für Wissensmedien (IWM)
Schleichstraße 6, 72076 Tübingen
Mail: a.scholl@iwm-tuebingen.de
Phone: +49 (0) 7071 979-257

Press:

Mira Keßler

Press and Public Relations

Phone: +49 (0) 7071 979-222 // Email: presse@iwm-tuebingen.de

The Leibniz-Institut für Wissensmedien

The Leibniz-Institut für Wissensmedien (IWM) analyses how digital technologies can be used to improve knowledge processes. The psychological basic research of the 110 scientists is concerned with practical fields like school and university, knowledge work with digital media, knowledge-based internet use and knowledge transfer in museums. From 2009 till 2016, the IWM together with the University of Tuebingen organised the first Leibniz-ScienceCampus about the topic “Informational Environments” which has been running as follow-up project under the heading “Cognitive Interfaces” since 2017.

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