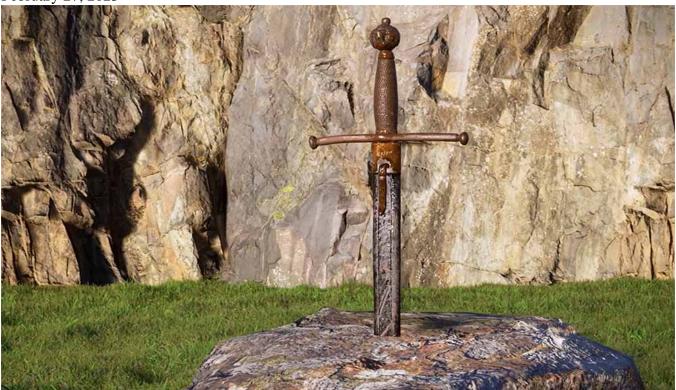# Sword From the Stone: Developing Leadership Across the Ages

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## Quick Take

- Evolution has paved two paths for those pursuing leadership: dominating others to hoard power through intimidation and building prestige by demonstrating expertise.
- Leadership may look different in adolescence than it does in adulthood. Recognizing these differences could help researchers identify generational shifts in leadership style.
- Narcissists often perceive themselves as "true leaders," but their leadership abilities may be no better than average.
- Effective leadership often requires managing smaller groups within a larger whole, encouraging "the many to become the one" without erasing differences.
- Entrepreneurial training can help people develop leadership skills in adulthood.

True leaders—or persuasive narcissists • Values development and adolescence • Learning to lead

The legend of how King Arthur came to rule over a fantastical version of medieval Britain has changed many times in the retelling, but the high-level details generally remain the same: While serving as a simple squire, young Arthur Pendragon proved the only one capable of pulling the sacred sword Excalibur from a stone, demonstrating he was the true heir of the king with a divine right to rule.

But, as Monty Python taught us, Camelot, 'tis a silly place. Today, with the exception of a handful of modern monarchs and heirs to proverbial corporate thrones, most leaders aren't born, they're developed, and researchers are just beginning to investigate how individuals of all ages learn to take the reins.

## True leaders—or persuasive narcissists?

One important point to consider is that the people who are most eager to lead aren't necessarily any better at it than their more humble peers. In some cases, they can even be uniquely harmful to a group's well-being. Everyone has a little bit of narcissism in them, noted Eddie Brummelman (University of Amsterdam) and colleagues in a 2021 *Psychological Science* article, but those highest in the trait have a seriously inflated sense of their own importance and entitlement and can be indifferent to the needs of others.

Different forms of narcissism include communal narcissism, in which a person also holds an exaggerated sense of their own helpfulness and morality, and vulnerable narcissism, in which a person is more sensitive to social rejection. In another form of narcissism, grandiose narcissists are often obsessed with the concept of intelligence, explained Marcin Zajenkowski (University of Warsaw) and Michael Dufner (University of Witten/Herdecke) in a 2020 *Current Directions in Psychological Science* article, because they perceive it as essential to attaining higher social status or "stand[ing] out from the masses." This leads people high in grandiose narcissism to overestimate their own intelligence despite being, on average, no smarter than anyone else.

Narcissistic individuals often display an air of confidence and charisma that aligns with many people's sense of what leadership should look like, Brummelman and colleagues wrote, but once they've actually secured power, they may lead in a domineering manner that could stifle collaboration and lower the overall performance of a group.

Those tendencies often begin early in life, when more narcissistic children may be known as "prime ministers of the playground," Brummelman said in an interview with the *Observer*.

## Group Leadership: The Superordinate Identity

While they might look good on a poster, platitudes like "we're all in this together" aren't quite enough to keep a company or country together.

"Leadership often is not you leading a bunch of individuals but you leading two or more separate groups, which can have very distinctive identities," said APS Fellow Michael A. Hogg (Claremont Graduate University) in an interview about intergroup leadership theory. "If you put them together and

say 'we're all the same,' both sides will say that's not true."

While downplaying differences to encourage a collective group identity can be appropriate in some circumstances, leaders more often find success by emphasizing an intergroup relational identity that simultaneously celebrates differences while recognizing how subgroups' distinct characteristics can help advance the larger group's goals, Hogg and David E. Rast, III (University of Alberta) wrote in a 2022 *Current Directions in Psychological Science* article. The subgroups can fall along the lines of identity, political affiliation, or even the different departments within a company or university.

"Leadership is a process through which the many become the one," Hogg and Rast wrote. "The challenge of intergroup leadership is to forge a superordinate identity that does not erase or blur the subgroups' identity boundaries."

Constructing a superordinate identity isn't something that can be forced, the researchers noted. It requires sincerely convincing group members that their interests are aligned. While it is often possible for organizations to bring workers together across subcultural differences, this can be much more challenging in the political arena, especially when it comes to leading subgroups that are deeply divided by long-standing historical conflicts related to essentialized identities like race and nationality, Hogg said.

"From a contemporary social-psychological perspective, leadership is typically viewed as a process by which a group's leader or leadership constructs and communicates a shared vision, identity, and set of practices that are internalized and enacted by the group's members," Hogg and Rast wrote. "It is a process of persuasion, not exercise of power over other people."

"Narcissistic children are often seen as true leaders by their classmates," he said. "We think that children, like adults, take the big talk of narcissistic individuals at face value. They may be unable to look through the narcissistic façade, mistaking confidence for competence."

In their 2021 *Psychological Science* study of 332 children ages 7 to 14, Brummelman and colleagues found that children who scored higher on a self-report measure of narcissism were more likely to be nominated as a "true leader" of their classroom by their fellow students. Children who were more narcissistic also rated themselves more highly on agentic traits such as intelligence, popularity, and confidence, but not on communal traits such as honesty, caring, and trustworthiness.

In the same study, the children were clustered in three-person groups with a randomly assigned leader and asked to complete a collaborative task. Each child was given a different set of information about three potential police officers and asked to contribute to a group decision about which one to hire. The third officer was objectively the best option, boasting the most positive and least negative traits. But if the group discussed only information that all three children had been given, they chose the first and second officers as the best candidates for the job. On the other hand, if the leader encouraged effective collaboration within the group so that all of the information was shared, the children knew to select the third officer

In addition, more narcissistic children reported perceiving themselves as performing better in the leadership role than less narcissistic leaders did, although narcissist-led groups were no more likely to complete the task successfully by hiring the best candidate. Nor did their group members rate them as better leaders.

"Narcissistic children had positive perceptions of their own leadership skills," Brummelman said. "Strikingly, however, they did not excel as leaders. Compared to other leaders, they did not show better leadership and did not guide their groups to better performance. They were perfectly average."

Taking a closer look at how leadership emerges in children could help identify the contexts in which the "bright side" of narcissists' desire to lead can be harnessed to help children become better leaders, he continued.

"Leadership emerges in childhood, but it is rarely studied in children. This is unfortunate because many foundational leadership skills are built in the classroom and on the playground," Brummelman said.

## Values development and adolescence

Two other characteristics often associated with leadership—with very different results—are dominance and prestige. In a [2017 *Current Directions in Psychological Science* article](#), Jon K. Maner (Florida State University) explained that dominance and prestige-oriented approaches to leadership reflect different evolutionary strategies for increasing an individual's social rank.

Most animals compete within their social hierarchies by using size, strength, and intimidation to dominate others and build short-lived alliances. Humans who pursue leadership through dominance tend to be more aggressive and disagreeable and are higher in dark triad traits such as narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellian social manipulation, Maner added. They also tend to view their team members as potential threats to their power.

"With dominance, high social rank is not freely conferred by others; it is seized and maintained through the use of power, fear, intimidation, and coercion," he wrote. "Unlike prestige, dominance is often displayed by those who feel they lack the skills and knowledge to assert their social rank through those means."

Prestige, by comparison, is a positive reputation based on respect and admiration. It can be gained by demonstrating skills and knowledge that are valuable to the people around us, allowing us to ascend the social hierarchy. People who pursue leadership through prestige tend to be more agreeable, have higher [self-esteem](#), and be less arrogant about their achievements.

"Prestige, but not dominance, is associated with appreciative humility, which results from a sense of personal success and leads people to celebrate others," Maner wrote. "Given these distinct profiles of personality and emotion, it comes as no surprise that people adopting a prestige strategy tend to be more well-liked than people adopting a dominance strategy."

These and other characteristics associated with leadership likely begin to emerge in adolescence, which

represents another underdeveloped area of leadership research, according to APS Fellow Jennifer Tackett (Northwestern University). Adolescent leadership development programs are everywhere, from schools to within community, religious, and political organizations, but more research is needed to identify what makes a leadership program effective, Tackett said in an interview with the *Observer*.

"There is no actual scientific study to inform what people are doing, so you have a situation where people are already investing enormous resources in terms of time and money toward leadership programs for adolescents. But as scientists, we have failed them because they have no actual scientific evidence base to use to inform the work that they are doing," said Tackett, who is also editor of *Clinical Psychological Science*. "We have a responsibility to be examining this from an empirical perspective so that these resources can be used most effectively."

Tackett and colleagues are jumpstarting this area of research through an ongoing study of how personality traits are associated with adolescents' dominance and prestige leadership styles, and how their leadership motivations may differ from those of young adults.

"We're talking about likely values-based instincts to engage in certain behaviors," Tackett said. "Values emerge in childhood, and certainly by the time you get to adolescence values development is occurring very rapidly alongside identity development and development of vocational interests."

# Emerging Research on Leadership

As part of the 2022 APS Annual Convention in Chicago, researchers described their upcoming work related to leadership during the poster showcase. Several of those researchers shared their thoughts on their early findings.

Learn more about the 2023 APS Annual Convention in Washington, DC.

*How Does Ethical Leadership Relate to Team Creativity? The Role of Collective Team Identification and Need for Cognitive Closure*

Sejin Keem (Portland State University), Gamze Koseoglu (The University of Melbourne), Inseong Jeong (Lingnan University), Christina E. Shalley (Georgia Institute of Technology): "Under the supervision of ethical leaders, teams are able to thrive with higher creativity because ethical leaders are likely to promote collective team identification, which fosters an emotional attachment among the team members. Furthermore, especially when team members possess high levels of need for cognitive closure (a tendency to find an answer in an ambiguous situation), ethical leadership can better promote team creativity by strengthening collective team identification."

*Impression Management in Leadership: We Choose Self-Promoting Candidates As Leaders Among the Incompetent Ones*

Elif Gizem, Demirag Burak & Zeynep Aycan (Koç University): "People are not overly sensitive to impression-management tactics or naïve to be misled by the impressions leaders create when faced with candidates with a high degree of knowledge, skills, and abilities. However, they select a self-promoting

candidate who creates an image of a typical leader if the competence level of the candidates in the pool is low. Organizations should develop stronger recruitment policies and practices to assess competence to avoid the misleading effects of impression-management tactics and incompetent leaders."

*Perceptions of Leaders Depending on Gender and Leadership Style*

Cheryl Stenmark, Maddison Burge, Ieva Zimmerman (Angelo State University): "This study compared perceptions of leaders based on gender and behaviors by comparing perceptions of male and female leaders who engaged in either communal (sympathetic and friendly) or agentic (independent and ambitious) behaviors. The results showed that participants preferred communal leaders over agentic leaders, and that the gender of the leader did not influence their perceptions of the leader. This suggests that people do not have gender preferences in their leaders, but what is really important to people is that their leaders are friendly and supportive."

Leadership tendencies and styles are part of the development of adolescent values. "Teenagers are not just little adults," Tackett added. "When you look at a group of adolescents, you don't see Fortune 500 CEOs running around. So part of what we try to do is take a really open-ended and very data-driven approach to saying, 'what does leadership look like in adolescents in their own right?'"

Venues for observing emerging leadership include students' clubs, sports, and other extracurricular activities, Tackett said. In these settings, dominance and prestige can be conceived as different approaches to pursuing popularity, she and colleagues noted in a 2022 *Perspectives on Psychological Science* article. Teenagers who value likeability, also known as sociometric popularity, tend to be kind, cooperative, and emotionally well-adjusted with high-quality friendships, the researchers wrote. By comparison, teens who value social status or perceived popularity can take a prosocial approach to climbing the social ladder, but they also tend to be more antisocial, aggressive, and domineering.

It's also possible that the generational pathways to dominance and prestige-based leadership may be different for adolescents today than in the past because of their increasingly active role in social justice work, Tackett said.

"Cultural interest in social justice activism [could be] providing an opportunity for a new brand of leadership to emerge in our young people," Tackett said. "I think it can also have real implications for the diversification of the leaders of tomorrow."

## Learning to lead

These early forays into how leadership develops in childhood and adolescence make it clear that there will always be a new class of little squires looking to pull a sword from whichever stone is before them. But that doesn't mean it's all over if you relate more to King Arthur's aged wizard Merlin than to the boy king himself. Although Merlin toiled in obscurity throughout his early life, his legend is that of King Arthur's advisor, a leadership challenge he rose to meet later in life.

Research supports the notion that leadership—in particular, the entrepreneurial agency required to start and maintain a small business—is a skill that can be learned in adulthood. Entrepreneurial training programs that emphasize developing personal initiative through goal setting, planning, and using feedback to inform future action appear to be highly effective at encouraging people to start and expand businesses, explained APS Fellow Michael Frese, Michael M. Gielnik, and Mona Mensmann (Leuphana University Lüneburg) in a 2016 *Current Directions in Psychological Science* article.

Frese and colleagues compared the outcomes of 15 three-day training sessions in which participants reviewed best practices related to marketing, finance, and legal planning, discussed business case studies, and made plans to start or improve their own business.

Undergraduate students who participated in training sessions in Uganda, Liberia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Rwanda created 70% more startups in the year after the intervention than those in control groups, Frese and colleagues wrote. Entrepreneurs with existing businesses boosted their sales by 27% and increased their number of employees by 35% one year postintervention.

When you combine the wisdom of age with "wise" interventions informed by science, it seems it's never too late to take the lead.

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