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In 1532, Niccolò Machiavelli posed a basic question that all leaders must confront: Is it better to be loved than feared, or be feared than loved? Machiavelli's answer: "Fear is a better, more effective means to maintaining power." Fast forward almost 500 years later. "Real power is—I don't even want to use the word—fear," remarks Donald Trump in 2016 in an interview as candidate for the U.S. presidency. Trump's approach to leadership and his above-all emphasis on strength would have impressed Machiavelli, who also prioritizes strength over all else, including morality. Despite the persistence of these centuries-old ideas, they miss the mark. Decades of scholarship reveal that love and fear are *both* powerful motivations of followership. Contrary to Machiavelli and Trump's convictions about power, love and fear are not only both important bases for acquiring and exercising status and power, but, if anything, love is an essential (if not more effective) ingredient to stable power across time and situations. This entry offers an examination of recent research on the effectiveness of dominance and prestige in both formal and information leadership roles. It also reveals how dominant leadership can at times also be a source of prestige. The entry concludes by describing the limits of dominance in leadership and how research reveals it is not a sustainable, long-term leadership style in successful groups.

Dominance and Prestige

In diverse species—from fish and birds to chickens and chimpanzees—social status accrues to individuals who are more able to inflict costs on others. Not only do these dominant individuals gain coercive influence over others' behaviors but they also enjoy more privileged access to contested resources such as food, spaces, and mates, which translate into reproductive gains and lead to higher fitness. Much like their primate relatives, humans, too, yield to more dominant individuals who impose force, intimidation, or threat and begrudgingly comply with their requests. In this sense, the pattern of conflict and conflict avoidance determine who gains power and who remains powerless in humans and other species alike. Yet, the forms in which dominance is expressed in humans tends to be more muted and psychological than physical in nature. Threatening to withhold the year-end bonus, speaking over, or putting down or ridiculing others are all-too-familiar moves from the dominance playbook.

Alongside dominance, however, there exists a second avenue to social status in human social groups and societies—people care deeply about who is competent, who has knowledge, and who can contribute to collective goals. These prestigious individuals are respected and revered, and their opinions and wishes are deferred to out of choice and free will, in exchange for learning opportunities or their services in generating benefits for the group.

Dominance and Prestige: Two Avenues to Influence and Informal Leadership

These two means to getting one's way—dominance (inducing fear and using coercion) and prestige (earning respect and exercising persuasion)—influence who is deferred to (whether to avoid harm or to gain some benefit) and how decisions are made within a group and thus are fundamental means by which informal leaders emerge. Three research studies, using different kinds of methodology, provide insight into how these two types of status affect informal leadership. In 2013, Joey Cheng and her colleagues brought a few hundred participants to a laboratory and assigned them to small, *minimal* groups of four to six individuals to observe how hierarchies emerge *in real time*. They found that individuals who managed to cultivate fear or earn respect emerged as informal leaders, spontaneously and rapidly—they became the most prominent, visible, and central members of the group (as revealed by the greater attention they received in the form of more eye gazes), and they steered the course of group discussions and wielded exceptional influence over the group's collective decisions.

Also, in contrast to dominant individuals, prestige-based leaders were deemed socially attractive by followers who desired to hang around them. This distinction is consistent with other studies indicating that prestigious individuals tended to be generous and kind and humble rather than aggrandizing like the dominants and sought out for advice on a variety of topics.

But how do more dominance-based leaders fare in the long run? Are they more able to maintain their power and influence than prestige-based leaders, as Machiavelli would believe? Here is where new research conducted by Kaylene McClanahan and her colleagues in 2021 offer key insights. Following project teams of working professionals who collaborated intensely over a one-month period to meet their deadline, these investigators demonstrated that people who were deemed dominant or prestigious emerged as informal leaders not only in the first hour of coming together as a group, but their disproportionate influence maintained over time and persisted well after the project's conclusion. But, as previously mentioned, important differences exist in the nature, or kind, of influence exercised. Groups members willingly paid deference to prestigious leaders, but were privately disinclined to defer to dominant leaders, whose wishes they merely complied with to avoid the costs of conflict or further harm.

Similar insights come from a 14-year long study of power and influence in the workplace. Cameron Anderson and his colleagues showed in a 2020 study that employees who intimidated or struck fear in coworkers (dominant) as well as those who were skilled and competent (prestigious) gained more power and influence in their organization. Crucially, however, in both of these studies of power over time, although dominance is a basis for acquiring informal leadership, prestige has a stronger effect on long-term influence relative to dominance.

What may explain the greater role of prestige compared to dominance? Scholars have proposed that the interplay of several factors has increased the relative importance of prestige in human societies—including human's greater cooperation and dependence on each other for knowledge acquisition, food production, and raising offspring; the rise and spread of meritocratic institutions; the proliferation of social norms that favor egalitarian behavior; and the ability to *vote with one's feet* in the face of coercion. As such, it can be said that Machiavelli overestimated the power of fear and underestimates the power of love. Prestige provides an equally (if not more) viable means to maintaining power as dominance.

When Dominance Is a Source of Prestige

Although dominance and prestige are distinct tactics to social status and informal leadership, they need not operate independently. In fact, the influence of many high-status people is rooted precisely in *both* processes. There are many contexts that lead to overlapping forms of status, one being that the traits, attributes, and motivations that generate coercive threat may also signal other locally valued abilities worthy of emulation or deference, thus commanding respect.

Consider how, for example, physically larger individuals (dominance) may be seen as capable of supplying benefits for in-group members; these benefits may be in the form of punishing in-group free riders, spearheading intergroup conflicts, or at compelling others into providing coalitional support. This means that physical stature cues not only dominance but also prestige.

Beyond physical stature and size, many other traits related to coercive capacity (dominance) can also elicit prestige-based deference. This includes direct and indirect cues of physical strength and mental steadfastness such as competitiveness, risk-seeking, bravery, emotional states such as anger, and vocal and facial markers of dominance (e.g., low voice pitch, wider face). The point is that individuals who possess these dominance cues will evoke some degree of prestige-based status, and both forms of status will form the basis of these individuals' overall influence.

Dominance and Prestige in Formal Leadership

When it comes to formal leadership, the same dominance and prestige processes also contribute to the influence of leaders who are formally recognized by the group, community, or institution. But unlike informal leaders whose influence and status can be more ephemeral, situational, and context-specific, institutional hierarchies often grant formal leaders, managers, and authorities legitimized power and control over rewards and punishments, thus evoking coercive threat. Meanwhile, formal leaders may nevertheless be assumed

to have achieved their position via skill or may genuinely demonstrate skill and success or can effectively contribute to collective action, and thereby command respect. This explains why many authorities—such as CEOs, teachers, and police—often pose a certain degree of coercive threat, even if they refrain from dominance and primarily rely on prestige-based influence. Formal leadership inherently creates some baseline degree of dominance onto which respect or fear is further cultivated.

The Limits of Dominance

Of course, a leader is a leader only when they have followers. Because the influence of dominance-based leaders is maintained by followers' avoidance of harm (rather than the provision of benefits, as in prestige-based leaders), coercive dominants are tolerated only to the degree that they continue to possess relative power to inflict costs, and the price of subordination is outweighed by the risks of challenging the status quo. This is true for formal leaders but even more so for informal leaders, whose status and influence may be more temporal and subject to continual negotiation with each collective action.

So, all leaders who rely on some dominance to maintain their power confront a similar challenge: Subordinates may form leveling coalitions to counter their despotism. For subordinates, collectively forming an alliance against the dominant is sensible as this reduces the costs of an otherwise individually very costly act, including lowering the risk of injury and retaliation. Several key motivational forces and moral values steer people toward leveling coalitions—preference for egalitarianism and autonomy, inequity aversion, and a distaste for displays of arrogance and aggrandizement.

To see the bounds that norms place on coercion and oppression, consider a 2019 study by Daniel Redhead and colleagues. They set up a longitudinal study of small collaborative student project groups with strong egalitarian and anti-aggression norms and tracked how people's influence unfolded over time. Their finding was that in groups with beliefs and norms that support egalitarian behavior, dominant individuals rose to influence when power was up for grabs, when the groups initially formed, but their impact over group decision-making declined rapidly. In fact, coercive individuals ceased to be influential by the four-week mark, even though they never stopped being feared. In this egalitarian context, only prestige provided a stable avenue to long-term influence.

In this way, coercing one's way to power is a more precarious strategy that may yield variable results across contexts. This study also highlights the constraints imposed on dominance by egalitarian norms. Purely coercive strategies to leadership will be muted and generate lower returns (that is, less successful) in groups and institutions with strong social norms that promote egalitarian behavior and suppress aggression.

What practical advice for leaders and organizations flow from this understanding of dominance, prestige, and leadership? After all, while force and coercion might allow a leader to fiendishly extract compliance and submission, only a respected leader can truly persuade and inspire deference, motivation, and loyalty among the people they are leading. One answer: creating egalitarian, antidominance norms and institutions is one of the most promising tools for suppressing dominance, promoting prestige-based leadership, and building more positive groups, teams, and organizations.

See also [Cognitive Biases in Leadership](#); [Followership](#); [Leader Emergence and Performance](#); [Political Leadership](#); [Power and Powerlessness](#)

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- dominance
- prestige
- fear

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