

Soft power: how a colleague's promotion weighs on the rest of the team

Trust is crucial for working relationships. And yet changes in status and power destabilize trust, putting team performances at risk. Research by Sebastien Brion highlights the dynamics in play.



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You're being considered for a promotion. You've worked hard, acquiring skills and experience, and you have a good, trusting relationship with your team.

But the promotion goes to a colleague, and whereas once you were on equal footing with this person, now you feel you've lost status.

What will probably happen next, [according to research](#) by IESE's [Sebastien Brion](#), with Ruo Mo and Robert B. Lount Jr., is that you'll become less trusting of your teammates. The research identifies how changes in power dynamics, perhaps due to a teammate's promotion, affects trust. Understanding the fluid influences of status and power is key for savvy management.

In praise of trust

Trust is a key feature of effective people, teams and organizations, having been shown to promote information-sharing, collaboration, job performance, and all-round commitment. At base, trust means being accepting of vulnerability on the assumption that others intend to treat you well.

Following a nine-month study of individuals working in teams, the authors concluded that when employees' level of power changes, their levels of trust change, too. A perceived loss of power introduces social uncertainty, insecurity and even paranoia into relationships. It also causes those who feel disenfranchised to give more credence to negative information about others.

Breaking trustworthiness down

Previous research has identified three components of trustworthiness: perceived ability (having relevant competencies), benevolence (wishing to do good) and integrity (adhering to acceptable principles). Changes in power seem to affect the second component, perceived benevolence, as those who lose power become more suspicious of others' intentions.

Put simply, the more power you feel you have, the more you trust other people, and a downturn in your fortunes at work may make you paranoid about the intentions of those around you. A key insight here is that trust is not static, it's dynamic, changing along with the conditions that lead to it.

Implications

This can have important implications for managers. Consider that high-performing teams may see relatively little hierarchy change, allowing the conditions for trust to really settle in. Meanwhile, those that are less effective may get reshuffled more frequently, eroding trust when it's most needed.

More generally, managers should be aware that any change in a team's hierarchy may cause

loss of trust in employees, and be vigilant against downward spirals in morale and performance.

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