No Wise Leader Ever Wished to Be Young(er): Backlash Against Young(er) Leaders

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Abstract

Although younger workers are often perceived as more motivated, healthier, and better performers than their older counterparts, anecdotal evidence suggests that they see their younger age as a handicap when climbing the hierarchal ladder. I will discuss research taking both a relative and absolute approach to leader age in which we examined why young(er) age might be a liability for leaders. Data from two sets of studies support that relatively younger and young leaders face considerable obstacles in emerging and being effective as a leader.

In a first research line, we have integrated insights from implicit leadership theory and the social identity theory of leadership to argue that leaders who are relatively younger than their teams experience a double misfit in terms of their prototypicality. Archival data from 430 organizational teams, two field experiments with 215 followers and 235 leaders, and a survey study with 280 leaders, show that this misfit results in lower legitimacy perceptions for younger leaders which subsequently leads to more turnover and absenteeism, and less satisfaction and performance for both leaders and team members.

In a second line of research, we employed social role theory to zoom in on the stereotypes that individuals have about younger (25-39 years), middle-aged (40-54 years), and older (55-69 years) individuals and how these map onto stereotypes about typical and ideal leaders. We hypothesize that young individuals exhibit a lower fit with both typical and ideal leadership stereotypes, making them be perceived as less suitable for leadership positions. Combined data from two studies (n=197 and n=648, respectively) show support for this prediction. Additionally, we find that the age of the rater moderates this effect, such that older raters indicate greater misfit between stereotypes about young individuals and leadership roles.