



STANFORD
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

STANFORD SOCIAL INNOVATION *review*

Upfront

The Crown Weighs Heavily on the Eyelids Why the powerful have a hard time taking other people's perspectives

By Alana Conner Snibbe

Stanford Social Innovation Review
Spring 2007

Copyright © 2007 by Leland Stanford Jr. University
All Rights Reserved



STANFORD
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

Stanford Social Innovation Review
518 Memorial Way, Stanford, CA 94305-5015
Ph: 650-725-5399. Fax: 650-723-0516
Email: info@ssireview.com, www.ssireview.com

The Crown Weighs Heavily on the Eyelids

Why the powerful have a hard time taking other people's perspectives

In early 1997, Robert L. Crandall infuriated a lot of flyboys and flygirls. The chairman and CEO of American Airlines accepted a substantial pay raise at the same time that he voted to cut pilots' pay. In response, the pilots' union called a strike, and President Bill Clinton had to intervene to quell the unrest.

Crandall's actions are a classic example of a powerful person failing to take the perspectives of others, says Adam D. Galinsky, a professor at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management. In a recent *Psychological Science* (vol. 17, no. 12) article, Galinsky and his colleagues demonstrate that this kind of power-induced narcissism is rather common. "Being in power makes you focus on your own needs and desires," rather than the needs and desires of those around you, he explains.

To test this idea, the researchers randomly assigned undergraduate students to either a high-power or low-power group in a series of experiments. Those in the high-power group wrote about a time when they had power over others. Those in the low-power group wrote about a time when others had power over them.

Participants then completed tasks that measured how much they considered other people's viewpoints. For example, in the "Drawing an E" experiment, researchers asked participants to write the capital letter "E" on their own foreheads. Some participants drew E's that felt right from their own vantage point, but that looked backwards to onlookers – that is, they drew self-oriented E's. Others drew E's that



"Nonsense! That's a perfectly good chair."

felt backwards to them but that looked correct to other people – that is, they drew other-oriented E's. More than a decade's worth of studies have shown that people who draw self-oriented E's think and care less about other people's points of view than do people

Power is the gas, but perspective-taking is the steering wheel. If you don't take other people's perspectives, you crash into things.

who draw other-oriented E's.

The researchers found that almost three times as many participants in the high-power group drew self-oriented E's on their foreheads as did participants in the low-power one. Their other experiments similarly revealed that participants in the high-power group were worse at guessing how people would interpret an ambiguous e-mail, or how others in photographs were feeling. In total, the experiments suggest that higher-power people have more difficulty deciphering the thoughts, feelings, and desires of others than do lower-power people.

A strength of these studies is that they experimentally manipulate people's sense of their own status, says Galinsky. In the real world, more- and

less-powerful people differ in ways other than just how much sway they hold. For example, top dogs often have more things to think about and more decisions to make – that is, greater “cognitive load” – than the rest of the pack. “They don’t have the time or energy to invest in the effortful process of considering and integrating a range of issues,” says Galinsky. And so if researchers want to know how much being in power affects perspective-taking, above and beyond the effects of cognitive load, they must make sure that higher- and lower-power people are carrying the same amounts of cognitive cargo.

But a reliance on experimental methods is also a weakness of the

research, says Judith Hall, a professor of psychology at Northeastern University who studies how power affects people’s ability to decode nonverbal behavior. “In real life, the roles that people are in are not randomly assigned to them,” she says. Rather, their roles partly reflect their skills. Her own research suggests that higher-status people are actually more skilled at reading others’ subtle cues than are lower-status people. “It’s much too early to say what the general conclusion is,” she says.

Both researchers agree, however, that everyone could do a better job of perspective-taking. Galinsky suggests that people schedule time to take a step back to consider the perspectives

of others. Doing so would be especially helpful to people in power. “Power is the gas, but perspective-taking is the steering wheel,” he says. “If you don’t take other people’s perspectives, you crash into things.” As a result, failing to assume the views of underlings can ultimately erode one’s power base: “When you don’t take other people’s perspectives, people feel betrayed, and then they get angry or seek revenge.”

The article’s other authors include Joe C. Magee of the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at New York University, and M. Ena Inesi and Deborah H. Gruenfeld at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. —Alana Conner Snibbe

tcc group

For over 27 years helping nonprofits, foundations, and corporate citizenship programs develop *strategies to achieve social impact.*

Services include:

- Evaluation
- Planning
- Program and Strategy Development
- Needs Assessment and Competitive Analysis
- Capacity Building
- Governance
- Grants Management

To learn how TCC Group can help your organization, visit us online at www.tccgrp.com, or give us a call at 888-222-2283.

New York ■ Philadelphia ■ Chicago



Full Circle Fund

**FULL IMPACT FORUM
PHILANTHROPY: 007
AGENTS OF CHANGE**

Congratulations to the winners of Full Circle Fund’s Impact Awards, agents of change that exemplify the depth of commitment that is needed by our community. The awards were presented at the Full Impact Forum on November 14, 2006.

TECHNOLOGY	Dwayne Jones, Communities of Opportunity
EDUCATION	Dom Summa, California Teachers Association
HOUSING	Salvador Menjivar, Hamilton Family Center
EXEMPLARY LEADERSHIP	Craig Newmark, craigslist & Craigslist Foundation Mary Huss, <i>San Francisco Business Times</i> SF Connect team
FULL CIRCLE FUND OUTSTANDING MEMBER	Dave McClure

Full Circle Fund is an engaged philanthropy organization cultivating the next generation of community leaders and driving lasting social change in the Bay Area.

www.fullcirclefund.org

Deloitte



CONSPIRACY PROJECT

Cooley
GODWARD KRONISH LLP



San Francisco Business Times