Power Reduces Awareness of Constraints

Key Concept
Whether imagining the future or reviewing the past, powerful people are consistently less aware of constraints and obstacles than the less powerful. This lack of constraint awareness explains their inhibition in attacking daunting goals and projects, but can also make them somewhat reckless and risk-taking.

Idea Summary
When it comes to setting and achieving goals, power makes a difference. Those with more power are quicker to establish goals, and to take action to achieve those goals, than people with less power. To some extent, this is understandable: the powerful are less dependent on others and have greater control over outcomes. They also have to worry less about what others think, which further lifts their inhibitions about pursuing the goals they have set.

A team of researchers from six universities have plunged further into the psychological reasons for the powerful’s uninhibited pursuit of goals using two experiments. The team designed experiments that included a memory task — the participants were given a long series of facts about an assigned goal and then asked later to recall them — and a fairy tale completion task. As demonstrated through these experiments, the powerful think differently. Specifically, the powerful have less memory of constraints than those less powerful — they are less likely to recall problems and setbacks than others. In addition, the powerful are less likely to consider constraints if they are asked to imagine the future.

For information that was facilitating as opposed to constraining, the results are dramatically different. The powerful had the same propensity to remember facilitating information and imagine facilitating information for future scenarios as those who were less powerful.

In short, a powerful person can discern as most people the factors or situations that might make a goal more achievable, but they fail to see any of the large barriers that worry the less powerful.

Business Application
It has been written before that a person’s greatest strength can also be their greatest weakness, and this certainly applies here. Those in power push ahead relentlessly and without hesitation as if they don’t realize that there are serious obstacles to be navigated, and for a good reason: They don’t. But this can-do attitude can also raise some concerns to which companies need to pay attention.
The research indicates that boards of directors, C-suite executives and other managers of those with power must make a special effort to raise their powerful leaders’ awareness of obstacles and constraints that can derail their objectives and initiatives. There are specific ways of doing this:

- Have the subordinates of powerful leaders present targeted reports that highlight risks and constraints.
- Ensure that there are number of voices playing devil’s advocate during decision-making meetings.
- Create a structure that explicitly reviews all critical organizational decisions before they are put into action.

The research reveals some societal implications that, while beyond the realm of business, are also interesting. For example, throughout history there have been periods of persecution of those with less power whose lack of resistance, or at least attempted resistance, is sometimes inexplicable. According to the researchers, this may be because those with less power are paralyzed by the potential obstacles on which they tend to focus — at a time when more than ever they need the innate fearlessness of the powerful.

Further Reading

Further Relevant Resources
Jennifer Whitson’s profile at University of Texas McCombs School of Business
Katie Liljenquist’s profile at Brigham Young University Marriott School of Management
Adam Galinsky’s profile at Columbia Business School
Joe Magee’s profile at NYU Stern School of Business
Deborah Gruenfeld’s profile at the Stanford Graduate School of Business
Brian Cadena’s profile at the University of Colorado Boulder
Columbia Business School Executive Education profile at IEDP
Stanford Graduate School of Business Executive Education profile at IEDP
NYU Stern School of Business Executive Education profile at IEDP