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# Looking a Leader, Becoming a Leader: Assertiveness versus Deference

By [Henrich Greve](#)

**The third presidential debate between President Barack Obama and Governor Mitt Romney had a one-on-one format that was in part a dialogue of the two, in part each of them addressing the camera and the moderator. In a dialogue format they get a chance to show how they address each other.**

Now, if you saw the debate, can you recall whether they were assertive in their style or whether you heard clauses that appeared to hedge their position or make disclaimers? Probably you remember an assertive style throughout, which is the style a politician who wants to be elected wants to cultivate. It is also the style that many leaders choose. Assertiveness is associated with self-confidence, which can make others confident in that person (or so it is thought). It also maintains an air of status and high position in a hierarchy. This is how we expect leaders in government and business to behave.

If so, is that how you should behave in order to become a leader? That is a trickier question. For one thing, people who are trying to advance up a career ladder may find it unwise to behave assertively toward their managers. It is widely thought to be bad idea, though the evidence of what would happen if you did so is not so rich. That's because people avoid assertiveness when interacting upwards in the hierarchy – they prefer to be a little deferential – and maybe we can't blame them for not running that experiment on themselves.. But what about the choice of assertiveness or deference in peer interactions? There one might see more of a battle for superiority through showing assertiveness, at least if we think of human workplaces as roughly akin to chimpanzee tribes with their dominance contests. But what a drag on productivity and strain on work relations that would be.

I can imagine workplaces that descend into dominance contests given the right (wrong?) kind of circumstances. But research by Alison Fragale and colleagues shows that the normal pattern is actually the opposite of this expectation: when interacting with peers in the workplace, people are especially careful to show deference in their statements. That is because peers have a greater need to signal friendly, non-threatening intentions to each other than individuals who interact up or down the hierarchy. Fragale and colleagues were able to show this through analysis of email logs in two studies, which was a clever design because people do tend to think a little longer before hitting “send” than they do before engaging vocal cords, so email communications are well-calibrated for tone as well as content.

I thought there was an interesting message in this research because it does suggest that an ability to get along and smooth social interactions is important in a career-oriented workplace where individuals want to get ahead. It is not just about sounding assertive and looking “leaderly.” And there is one detail about this research that I found particularly delightful: One of the studies used email records from the West Power Trading division of Enron; not an organization known for its warm and fuzzy organizational culture!

**Fragale, Alison R., John J. Sumanth, Larissa Z. Tiedens, and Gregory B. Northcraft. 2012. Appeasing Equals: Lateral Deference in Organizational Communication Administrative Science Quarterly, 57:373-406**

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