
Braggy Bosses Can Boost Their Teams



By Kelly Nault , IE, and Andy J. Yap , INSEAD

We love bosses who brag about their accomplishments - and loathe colleagues who do the same.

Nothing is more annoying than someone bragging about their success. Right? Not necessarily so, as it turns out. When bosses brag, it can inspire their reports to put more effort into their own work. Specifically, when bosses, whom employees regard as role models, brag about their work accomplishments, their subordinates report feeling more inspired and motivated.

However, it's entirely another story when we hear our peers at work brag – their accomplishments threaten our ego. If they managed to achieve that success, why haven't we? It is triggering.

In our [research](#), we found that when a role model mentions one of their achievements, we tend to appraise it differently. Their higher rank in the organisation makes us think that they have earned their success. When they share work-relevant positive stories about themselves, this information becomes a roadmap for people who aspire to achieve similar success.

Our findings are in line with recent [research](#) showing that observers are much more receptive to self-promotion when it is framed as a journey toward achieving success rather than mere bragging about end results.

Bragging is in the eye of the beholder

The benefits of self-promotion can be seen in various spheres. For instance, social media influencers can garner likes, comments and even [hundreds of thousands of dollars](#) with a single self-promoting post.

In the past, much of the research about self-promotion focused on what self-promoters stand to gain or lose. For instance, does bragging help when pitching to investors? (Answer: Yes, you should do it.) In our research, we looked at the affective and emotional impact of self-promotion on those who *witness* it.

We ran nine experimental studies involving some 2,600 participants in the United States, United Kingdom and Singapore. Work was always the supplied context of our experiments. Across studies, subordinates reported feeling hopeful and inspired when they observed a superior engaging in self-promotion. However, when their own peers (or subordinates) bragged in the exact same way, we observed no such aspirational effect. In this case, our results aligned with research that found self-promoters were perceived as arrogant (perhaps highly competent, but mostly arrogant).

In some of our studies, we asked participants to describe real-life instances where they witnessed self-promotion at work. In other studies, we asked them to consider how they would feel in various hypothetical situations. For example, in one study, participants watched a 20-second video in which a “colleague” explained how she had been selected to lead an important project.

Overall, we used various techniques to create personally relevant and believable experimental scenarios. Then we measured the observers’ reactions: Did they feel positive, enthusiastic, excited – or did they feel threatened, angry, annoyed? And to what extent?

Inspiring others to work towards their futures selves

Our data established a first condition: For bragging to boost motivation, the role model must be admired and respected by the observer. It was also critical that those higher in the hierarchy talked about a success that

observers could imagine achieving themselves one day.

For instance, in an experiment, the self-promoter said that he had landed a prized job because he had spent his childhood in Japan – a condition essentially impossible to replicate for participants. Therefore, they felt considerably less inspired than other participants who were told that the promotion was a reward for having met sales goals six months in a row.

The achievement also needs to be directly relevant to the observers' own professional life. For example, participants were left uninspired when the self-promoter bragged about adding a new Rolex watch to his collection. Although the collection of expensive watches implied material success, it wasn't relevant to observers when it came to furthering their own goals.

Interestingly, our research didn't reveal any gender or race effect. That is, whether the braggart was of the same gender or same race as the observer didn't influence our results. The aspirational effect remained consistent. The age or level of education of the participants also didn't matter.

However, other research on role models has shown that we may be more motivated by the achievements of people we can identify with. For instance, using female role models in advertisements for a female-only software coding bootcamp **increased the take-up rate** in Latin America. When young Latinas were shown proof that the tech industry wasn't closed off to them, it boosted their motivation to give this career a try.

To inspire your team, tell them about achievements that are in the realm of the possible for your reports. Success should be due to factors under the control of most people, such as effort, as opposed to luck or personal circumstances that can't be replicated. Include actionable steps that create a roadmap for how to achieve a similar success.

It's essential that you don't brag about things that your subordinates could never achieve due to obvious constraints, like resources. Avoid repeating yourself. Telling the story once will do.

It's official: Whether it's over a chat at the water-cooler or on social media, if you're a team leader, don't hesitate to share positive things about yourself when your reports are around. It might just give them the boost they need to achieve their own goals.

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About the research

"The Self-Promotion Boost: Positive consequences for observers of high-rank self-promoters", online advance publication, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.