

The Zelensky Effect

Leadership Makes a Difference

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Republished February 2023 to recognise the extraordinary leadership shown by Volodymyr Zelensky and the courage of the Ukrainian people one year into Russia's brutal invasion of their homeland.



The Zelensky Effect

You can't be a serious student of leadership and not be fascinated by 'the Zelensky effect'.

How this former comedian has transformed himself into a heroic wartime leader. How he has united and galvanised his people, indeed, the whole world, in the fight against a brutal invading army.

There is much to read and listen to about what makes Zelensky such an extraordinary leader. Commentary that attempts to explain why we stop and lean in when he is speaking, to view another social media post of him visiting injured Ukrainians in his signature battle green fatigues, or to wholeheartedly support our own government's sanction against Russia and material support for the Ukrainians.

I particularly like [Adam Grant's](#) summary:

- Zelensky's Charisma – attracts our attention
- Zelensky's Courage – earns him our admiration

- But what really inspires loyalty is Zelensky's commitment and identification with his group - his 'prototypicality'. How he exemplifies the values that are most central to the identity of his group - the Ukrainian people. Articulated best by his statement, 'I need ammo, not a ride', clearly signalling he is willing to die protecting his people.

It's so refreshing to see great leadership emerge. I was starting to despair about world leadership after the recent litany of atrocious world leaders - Trump, Putin, Johnson, and even Australia's own Scott Morrison.

I don't want to add to the Zelensky commentary per se, I was interested to view Zelensky's and Putin's leadership styles through the lens of the leadership circumplex, and, how these two leaders impact their followers.

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Mapping Zelensky and Putin onto the Leadership Circumplex

Both Zelensky and Putin are 'strong' leaders, high on the Agency axis of the Leadership Circumplex their leadership styles are Dominant. They are recognised as 'alphas' in hierarchical terms, Zelensky as an Inspirational leader, Putin as an Authoritarian leader. However, they differ on the Communion axis, with Zelensky being Dominant and Friendly/Prosocial expressed in his empathy and obvious care for the suffering of his people. Putin is Dominant but sits on the left-hand side of the Leadership Circumplex, being Hostile/Antisocial and seemingly disconnected from the suffering of his countrymen and women.

What I find most fascinating about Zelensky's leadership style is its power to influence others to follow and support his cause. The Leadership Circumplex predicts this leader-follower dynamic of Dominant / Friendly leaders pulling 'followership' from others or a Submissive / Friendly response. See figure opposite.

	Zelensky 	Putin 
Agency	Dominant	Dominant
Communion	Friendly/Prosocial	Hostile/Antisocial
Quadrant	Charismatic	Autocratic
Leadership Style	Inspirational	Authoritarian
Behaviour	Leaders inspire and stimulate others by self-assured action, courage and clear messages	Leaders force others to obey them, tend to be harsh on followers, and do not accept criticism
Impact on followers	Positive 'Followership'	Negative Compliance

Sources: Vermeren, P. (2014). Around leadership. Melbourne: Around Publishing Pty. Ltd. Circumplex Leadership Scan 360 (CLS360). Interpersonal Solutions Group Pty. Ltd.

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The Leadership Circumplex— Leader Strategy and Likely Follower Reactions

Leadership Strategy Leadership Interpersonal Style Follower Reaction Process

Charismatic



On the left-hand side of the circumplex, Dominant / Hostile Authoritarian leaders pull Submission combined with Hostility, that is, passive-aggressive compliance driven by fear and anxiety. Media reports Russian army conscripts abandoning their equipment, lacking purpose and the will to fight. In extreme cases, reports tell of commanding officers being run over by their subordinates.

If want to read more about how the Leadership Circumplex predicts how others will respond to your leadership style - [here](#).

Leadership Strategy Leadership Interpersonal Style Follower Reaction Process

Autocratic



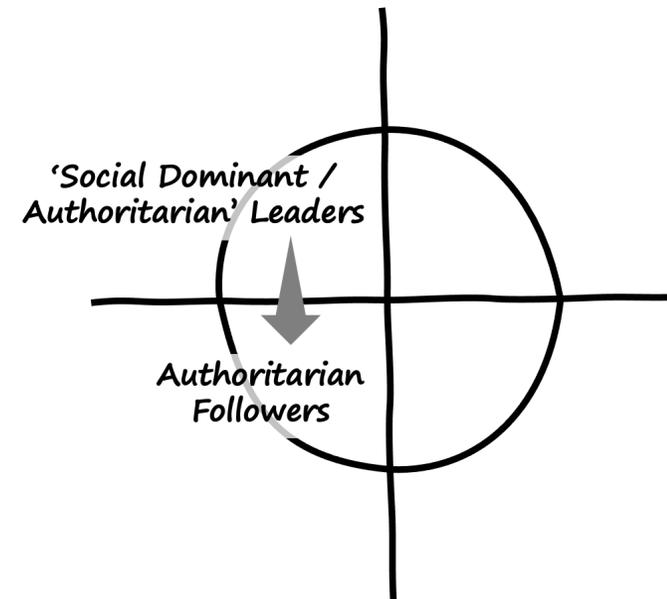
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Are You an 'Authoritarian Follower'?

If you are reading this, you are probably part of the population who responds positively to transformational leadership, motivated by styles, such as, Inspirational. But this isn't a universal motivation. Research shows there is a personality trait that predicts a significant part of the population will prefer being submissive to authority figures - 'right-wing authoritarianism' (RWA).

First coined by Bob Altemeyer, the Canadian-American social psychologist, right-wing authoritarianism is a personality trait that predicts submission to authority, willingness to act aggressively for the authoritarian leader, and being very conventional in thought and behaviour.

Interestingly, up to 26% of the US population has been measured as being 'high on RWA' and goes some way to explaining Donald Trump's immovable popularity amongst his 'base'.



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Importantly, Altemeyer identified this population of 'authoritarian followers' as being more easily manipulated by authoritarian leaders or 'social dominators'. Social dominators crave power over others and with authoritarian followers' desire for a 'strong leader', it's not hard to make sense of their appeal, especially as the context becomes uncertain and dangerous. Of course, authoritarian leaders throughout history understand how to manipulate the threat - real or imagined - of external enemies to consolidate power. For example, Putin's 'special operations' to 'denazify' Ukraine, or closer to home, Australia's Defence Minister Dutton's beating the drums of war about China appealing to the far right of his party and authoritarian followers.

Are You An Organisational 'Authoritarian Follower'?

Let's not kid ourselves, we can all get trapped in unhealthy leadership-follower relationships. We might not be subject to

compulsory national military service, but many of us feel trapped as 'economic conscripts' needing to comply with an authoritarian boss and struggle in a coercive culture for a paycheque.

As one leader I was coaching recently put it, 'when you are my age, the opportunities are less and less to move to escape a dictatorial boss'. Whilst, I don't think this leader had an RWA personality, he was trapped as so many of us have been in a dysfunctional leader-follower relationship.

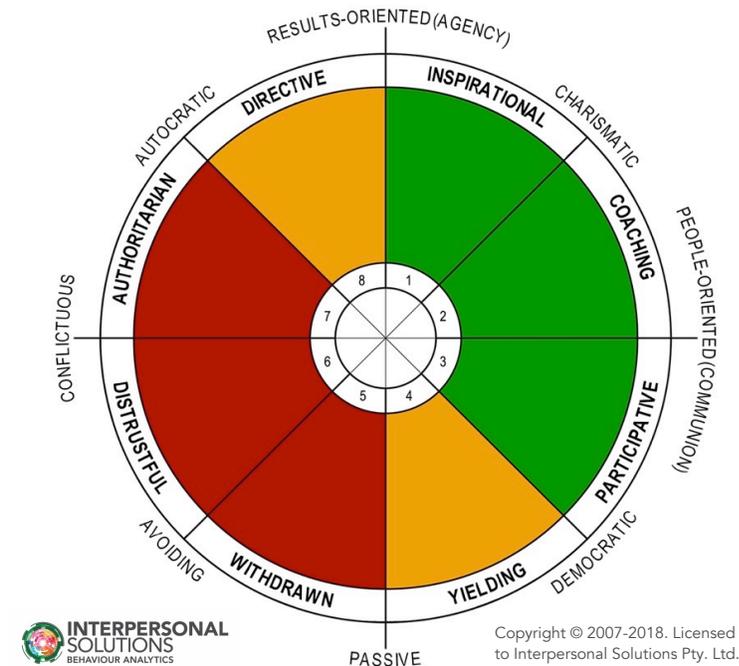
RWA and Social Dominance theory predict a percentage of the population will prefer organisations where hierarchical relations are required and maintained - think military and uniformed organisations. But what about the average organisation you and I work in? Are many of the challenging toxic leaders and cultures we experience, a result of these personalities?

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Transformational Leadership Is Still The Key

Whatever happens in Ukraine in the coming weeks and months, one thing is for sure, we are seeing the power of great leadership and true followership transforming certain defeat into a fighting chance.

Zelensky's courage, charisma, and prototypicality are testament that great leadership still exists and can emerge when it is most needed. And he represents a role model for all of us who aspire to lead and create a better world.



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To learn more about how to grow as a leader and more effectively influence your followers, contact us:

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