

“What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger”: New research shows that experiencing regular disruptive events strengthens people's leader identity

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People that experience frequent disruptive events are much more likely to become aware of their own leader identity, according to new research by Durham University.

Whilst many believe that impactful, disruptive, and novel events could be detrimental to building a leader’s confidence, the study proves the term “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger”, as experiencing strong events made people more aware of their leader capabilities.

This research was conducted by Dr Karolina Nieberle, Assistant Professor in Social and Organisational Psychology at Durham University’s Department of Psychology, alongside colleagues from Durham University Business School, as well as Binghamton University in the United States, and Alliance Manchester Business School in the UK. The researchers wanted to understand the impact of daily events and event chains on people’s leader identity on the same day and across time. That is, does the type of events that people encounter change the way how they see themselves with regards to leadership?

In order to do so, the researchers interviewed 69 young adults, who just entered their university study in the UK, across a total of 21 days (1159 data points). On each day of the study, participants reflected on an important daily event that happened to them, and rated how novel, disruptive, and extraordinary the event was. Via an innovative graphical measure, participants further indicated how much they felt like a leader and a follower on the given day. This allowed the researchers to analyse the relationship between events and young adults’ leader identity on a daily basis, but also across multiple days.

The researchers found that experiencing strong events (i.e., novel, disruptive, extraordinary events), made young adults feel more like a leader than they usually do. However, experiencing weaker events (i.e., well-known, ordinary and non-disruptive events) made young adults feel more like a follower as compared to how they usually feel.

That is, depending upon the strength of the events, young adults’ leader or their follower identities became more active and made them more (or less) likely to think and act like leaders. Over time, the chain of events that young adults encountered determined how much and in which direction their leader (and follower) identities ebb and flowed around what they usually have as their leader identity comfort zone.

“Facing new and challenging situations, as well as dealing with unexpected or even disruptive issues are common experiences at work and especially for leaders. This often creates a lot of uncertainty, especially when leaders are early in their career, as there is no clear guidance available on how to handle these situations” says Karolina Nieberle.

“However, our research shows that these challenging and disruptive experiences have positive effects on what we call a leader identity, that is, on how much people feel and act like leaders. Strong events will push leaders to explore new leader identity states outside of what they usually feel most comfortable

with. Every time, leaders experience these pushes, they will be likely to acquire new leadership-relevant skills and knowledge, which will likely make them stronger leaders over time”.

These research findings outline the importance of allowing developing leaders to experience and take a hand in managing disruptions and major events, to build their confidence, skillset and resilience as their roles develop.

The researchers say that organisations should look to ensure that young potential leaders have the opportunity to seek events that feel important and novel, disruptive, and extraordinary to them. This can help them to explore their leader identity beyond their current comfort zone, and help to build and strengthen it over time.

However, it is important this is done in a “safe” environment, and organisations should offer safe spaces which will allow less experienced members to take risks and embrace strong events with a discovery-oriented mindset.

If you would like to speak to the researchers or receive the full research paper, please contact Peter Remon at BlueSky Education – peter@bluesky-pr.com +44 77 235 228 30.