NEUROSCIENCE

What makes a leader?

Science **361**, eaat0036 (2018)

Credit: Artur Marciniak/Alamy Stock Photo

Being a leader involves taking responsibility for decisions that affect other people. What draws some people to assume this role and to seek such responsibility?

Micah Edelson, of the University of Zürich, and colleagues combined behavioural, computational and neurobiological methods to understand what motivates some people to lead and some to follow. They asked people to make decisions that had either safe or risky outcomes and allowed them to choose whether both the decision and the outcome should be made by the group or by themselves. Most of the participants chose to defer more often when deciding for the group; they did not want to take the responsibility for the result of the riskier decision. Computational modelling revealed that this responsibility aversion was driven by the need to feel more certain about the decision. Having identified the specific cognitive components that discourage people from leading, Edelson and colleagues turned to the brain and found that those areas of the brain that were involved in computing each aspect of the decision task were able to explain the individual differences in responsibility aversion, the key deterrent to leadership.

Leaders, therefore, are those who are not averse to responsibility, a trait which, in turn, is based on the way a person weighs the evidence before making a decision.

Mary Elizabeth Sutherland

Published online: 13 September 2018

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-018-0446-9>