

CHAZEN INSTITUTE RESEARCH BRIEF

How Leaders Can Spark Social Change

Experimental Evidence from Unions in Myanmar

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ✓ Embedding “line leaders” (lower-level, typically non-elected leaders) in worker discussion groups increased alignment of workers’ views with union objectives. Rather than simply aggregating workers’ views and building consensus around the median worker’s view, embedded leaders built consensus that aligned with union leadership’s objectives.
- ✓ Line leaders matter for mobilizing workers for collective actions to benefit the union. Leaders increase participation through a coordination channel. Workers are more likely to participate in a collective action when they learn that most of their peers are being invited by a leader, compared to when they learn most are not. This suggests that leaders inviting people, then communicating about it, coordinates workers’ beliefs that their peers will participate in the action.
- ✓ Union leaders exhibit distinct traits compared to members and non-members. Leaders tend to be more extroverted, conscientious, and altruistic, as well as less neurotic. They also earn less than workers with similar demographics, skills, and traits, suggesting that union leadership roles may come at a personal cost.

Social movements have been catalysts for numerous institutional changes throughout modern history: the eight-hour work day movement in the 19th century, the suffragettes in the early 1900s, the civil rights movements in the 1950s, and the green movement in recent decades, to name just a few.

But to succeed and ultimately facilitate institutional change, social movements must effectively build consensus among often-diverse members, as well as mobilize actions that may involve uncertain outcomes and high costs for individuals. In both consensus building and mobilization, movement leaders play critical roles, but empirical evidence of the impact of leaders has generally remained scarce due to measurement and causal identification challenges.

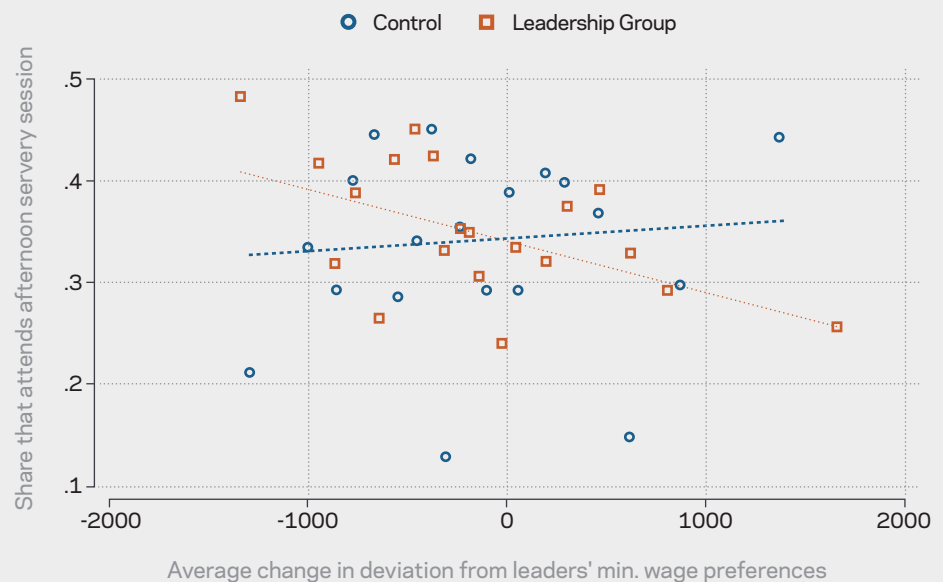
In [“Union Leaders: Experimental Evidence from Myanmar.”](#) co-authored by **Chazen Senior Scholar Laura Boudreau**, Rocco Macchiavello and Virginia Minni of the London School of Economics, and Mari Tanaka of Hitotsubashi University, the authors present the first experimental evidence of leaders’ roles as coordinators in both members’ views (consensus building) and actions (mobilization). Among other findings, their results suggest that the presence and specific actions of union leaders can have clear, measurable impacts on both consensus building and mobilization among union members.

Research

This study examined the role of union leaders within Myanmar’s burgeoning labor movement, one that is broadly representative of struggles in organizing labor in newly industrializing countries. The study was conducted in collaboration with the Confederation of Trade Unions in Myanmar (CTUM), the largest confederation of labor unions at the national level, during the months preceding the revision of the national minimum wage.

Average Convergence to Union Minimum Wage Preference & Share Mobilized

The plot illustrates that discussion groups with higher convergence to leaders' views (i.e., minimum wage preferences) also experience a higher degree of mobilization (i.e., attendance at the survey session). Most notably, this pattern only holds for groups that were exposed to a leader during the discussion ("Leader Group"), while no such evidence is detected in control groups. This pattern suggests that consensus-building may play an important role in mobilizing individuals.



The study looked at two facets of organization: consensus-building and mobilization. In the first experiment, researchers looked at whether and how line leaders built consensus around the union's objectives regarding minimum wage. The second experiment explored how important these leaders are in mobilizing workers around a collective action and the channels through which they achieve mobilization (e.g., motivating worker turn out, coordinating workers' actions to achieve a high level of participation, and enforcing social sanctions on workers who do not participate).

The study was implemented among workers employed at garment factories with a CTUM-affiliated union in the Yangon and Bago regions, which are home to the majority of garment factories in Myanmar, from December 2019 to March 2020. The researchers invited 28 garment factories that had a union affiliated with the CTUM in these regions to participate; due to COVID-19, the study needed to be cut short, and 17 of these unions fully completed the data collection activities, while two unions partially completed them.

Sampling involved a stratified random selection of approximately 90 workers per factory. Final participants included 19 union presidents, 170 line leaders, and 916 workers, including 594 union members and 322 non-union members.

Results

The results of this study spanned three major areas:

- the psychological and personality traits that tend to be more pronounced among union leaders as compared to union members and non-members
- the degree to which union leaders can impact consensus building
- the degree to which union leaders can impact mobilization

Union leaders were found to be distinct from union members and non-members along key traits that psychologists and organizational sociologists associate with the ability to influence collective outcomes, as well as other traits that economists identify as relevant for political selection. Union leaders are more extroverted, less neurotic, more conscientious and more altruistic compared to workers, and they have greater grit, greater locus of control and more work experience. However, they earn substantially less than workers who share similar demographics, ability, skills and personality traits, suggesting that union leadership roles may come at significant private costs.

In terms of building consensus, embedding "line leaders" (non-executive, lower-level, typically non-elected leaders) within worker discussion groups was found to measurably increase the degree to which workers' views were aligned

with those of their unions. Rather than simply aggregating workers' views and building consensus around the median worker's view, embedded leaders effectively built consensus that was in alignment with union leadership's objectives. This effect was present whether or not the line leader had existing relationships with members of the worker group in which they were embedded.

In terms of mobilization, certain specific interactions with line leaders were found to impact worker mobilization more significantly than others. In this experiment, workers were invited to participate in an unannounced survey on living costs. Participating in the survey was a costly action in the public good because the CTUM would use the results to determine its position on the minimum wage. The research team provided incentives for the discussion groups from the first experiment to participate in the second by making a donation to a skills-training center if the entire group participated.

The researchers found that workers who were informed that a leader would be made aware of their decision to participate in the unannounced survey were more likely to take the survey. Simply being invited to take the survey by a union leader did not have a significant impact on whether the member did so. But moving from being informed that most of a member's discussion group would not be invited by the leader to take the survey, to learning that most of a member's discussion group would be invited by the leader to take the survey, did significantly increase the likelihood that the worker participated in the survey.

Conclusion

Leaders are critical for both coordinating views and driving collective actions. The identification of a positive correlation between consensus building and mobilization in a social movement suggests that achieving consensus is the first step needed to mobilize individuals. As the first known documentation of this link within an experimental setting, this paper highlights the importance of grassroots leadership in the cultivation of collective action in labor movements.

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