

What Breaks a Leader

The EQ-i 2.0 defines Assertiveness as expressing thoughts, feelings, and beliefs openly, in a way that's non-offensive and non-destructive. That's a more specific, and more positive, definition than the word "assertive" often carries in everyday conversation, which is worth keeping in mind as you read the findings below.

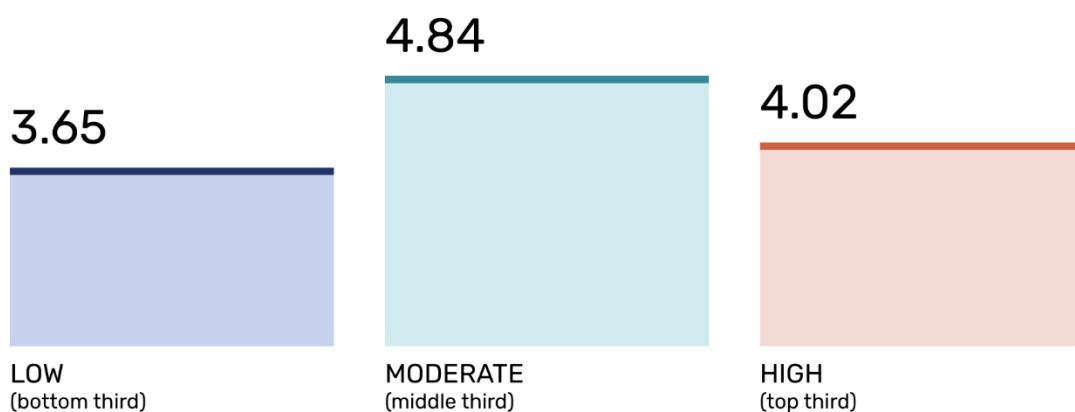
What the Researchers Did

Across three studies, Ames and Flynn combined qualitative coding of coworkers' and subordinates' open-ended comments about leaders' strengths and weaknesses with quantitative ratings of leadership behaviour and effectiveness. Their aim was to test whether assertiveness relates to leadership effectiveness in a straight line, as most prior research had assumed, or in a curve.

What They Found

Leaders judged as markedly low or markedly high in assertiveness were both rated as less effective than leaders in the middle of the range. Study 3 split leaders into thirds by assertiveness and compared subordinates' ratings of leadership effectiveness on a 7-point scale and the dip on both ends shows up clearly in the actual numbers.

What Breaks a Leader: The Curvilinear Relation Between Assertiveness and Leadership



Leadership effectiveness rating (1-7 scale) by assertiveness tertile. Source: Ames & Flynn (2007), Study 3.

Source: Freedman, What Breaks a Leader: The Curvilinear Relation Between Assertiveness and Leadership, Ames, D. R., & Flynn, F. J. (2007), Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 92(2), 307-324.

The researchers traced this to two different kinds of cost: under-assertive leaders paid an instrumental cost, struggling to get ideas heard and goals achieved, while over-assertive leaders paid a social cost, damaging the relationships and trust that leadership depends on. Perceptions of leaders as having too much or too little assertiveness were both common - the qualitative study underlines just how common.

A quick note on language, relevant to the stat below: when coworkers in this study described a leader as “assertive” in a critical comment, they were almost certainly using the word in its everyday sense i.e. forceful, pushy, or overbearing, rather than the more precise sense used in this article.

In the EQ-i 2.0 model, Assertiveness specifically means expressing thoughts and feelings openly in a way that is non-offensive and non-destructive; a genuinely high score on the model is, by definition, not the same thing as being aggressive.

“ASSERTIVE”	52% vs 48%
was the single most common word leaders' coworkers used when describing a leadership weakness — well ahead of any other trait.	of those weakness comments described under assertiveness; the rest described overassertiveness — a near-even split.

Source: Ames & Flynn (2007), Study 1 — coded coworker comments on leadership strengths and weaknesses.

Why it Matters

This is the empirical backbone of what the EQ-i 2.0 argues conceptually: Assertiveness isn't a trait to maximise or minimise, it's a capability that needs the right company. Read alongside the EQ-i model, the leaders in this research who were rated “too assertive” are best understood as leaders whose Assertiveness was running ahead of their Empathy or Impulse Control, not as evidence that directness itself backfires.

For leaders currently erring toward silence in the name of psychological safety, the research is still a useful corrective: it doesn't support the fear that speaking clearly damages a team. It supports investing in the combination of Assertiveness **and** the subscales that keep it constructive.

Source: What Breaks a Leader: The Curvilinear Relation Between Assertiveness and Leadership, Ames, D. R., & Flynn, F. J. (2007). Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 92(2), 307–324.