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**IDEA WATCH**

## How Earlobes Can Signify Leadership Potential

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**MANAGEMENT** by Carl Senior, Robin Martin, Michael West, and Rowena M. Yeats

# How Earlobes Can Signify Leadership Potential

**E**volutionary biologists have learned that people with greater “genetic fitness,” as manifested by a high degree of left-right body symmetry, are not just considered better looking but also tend to be healthier, more intelligent, and more dominant than others. They’re the classic alphas who rise to the top of rigidly hierarchical organizations such as the military.

But our research shows that people with subtle asymmetries—for example, imbalances in ear or finger length—are often better “transformational” leaders, able to inspire followers to put self-interest aside for the good of the group. Furthermore, teams they lead outperform teams whose leaders have more-symmetrical bodies.

These findings add a new twist to the debate about whether effective leaders are born or made. We believe it’s not asym-

metry per se that positions people to be good transformational leaders. Instead, we argue, these individuals’ childhood responses to others’ perceptions shape them for success.

In our study, conducted with Geoff Thomas and Anna Topakas, of the UK’s Aston University, 80 students filled out questionnaires exploring their leadership styles. In a second study, 42 students each led a small team that, using a computer simulation, spent 22 weeks manufacturing and marketing a car. In both studies we measured participants’ earlobes, wrist widths, and finger lengths and assigned them a score reflecting their degree of asymmetry.

The first study showed that highly asymmetrical people had greater self-reported leadership abilities—aptitudes for considering others’ feelings, recognizing

others’ needs, and inspiring others. The second showed that the more asymmetrical the leader, the better the team’s performance, according to independent assessments: Teams with asymmetrical leaders scored nearly 20% higher than others.




Although the sorts of asymmetries we examined are barely perceptible, humans are unconsciously sensitive to them. We posit that people born with asymmetries tend to develop greater empathy, social intelligence, and motivational skills as a way of overcoming perceptions that they’re unattractive or unintelligent. And those skills can be more helpful than pure dominance in attaining certain leadership positions.

We’re not the first to suggest that biology contributes to leadership potential. For instance, a recent twins study led by Sankalp Chaturvedi, of Imperial College London, indicates that 49% of transformational leadership qualities are genetic, and the psychologist Mark van Vugt has shown that humans evolved to value leaders with such traits as nonverbal sensitivity and self-sacrifice. We believe that organizations can benefit from a greater awareness of the many ways in which biological cues can influence leadership potential and that they should design leadership training to hone people’s abilities to encourage and inspire—particularly when people haven’t picked up those abilities naturally. ♥

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**WHAT’S YOUR SCORE?**  
Subtle asymmetries aside, most research shows that facial symmetry conveys beauty and can help boost careers. How symmetrical is your face? To find out, upload a headshot to [anaface.com](http://anaface.com). Here are three CEOs’ results (a perfect score is 10):

		
<b>CHARLES SCHWAB</b> CHARLES SCHWAB	<b>MARGARET C. WHITMAN</b> HEWLETT-PACKARD	<b>JEFF BEZOS</b> AMAZON
<b>8.43</b>	<b>8.25</b>	<b>6.93</b>

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