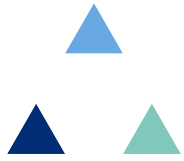


WHEN RETURN-TO-OFFICE MANDATES ARE ABOUT MORE THAN WORK

Why do some leaders strongly resist remote work while others embrace it? New research suggests the answer may have less to do with productivity, collaboration, or culture than with how leaders experience power, influence, and status in the workplace.

Featuring research by Marissa Solomon Shandell, Courtney Elliott, and Adam Grant





Summary

As organizations continue to debate the future of remote and hybrid work, leaders often frame return-to-office decisions in terms of productivity, collaboration, innovation, or culture. New research suggests there may be another factor at play: the personal motivations of leaders themselves.

Examining Fortune 500 CEOs and hundreds of organizational leaders, researchers found that leaders higher in narcissism were more likely to resist remote work because it threatened their sense of power and status. The findings challenge the assumption that opposition to remote work is always driven by organizational concerns and invite leaders to examine how personal motivations may shape workplace decisions.

The Leadership Challenge

Few leadership issues have generated as much debate in recent years as where work should happen. Some organizations have embraced flexible and hybrid work arrangements as a permanent feature of modern work. Others have pushed employees back into the office, arguing that face-to-face interaction is essential for productivity, collaboration, innovation, and organizational culture.

These debates are often framed as questions about organizational effectiveness. Leaders weigh competing evidence, assess business needs, and determine what arrangement will best support performance. Yet the strong differences in how leaders approach remote work raise an important question: if organizations face similar challenges and have access to similar technologies, why do some leaders strongly support remote work while others actively resist it?

The answer may have less to do with the work itself and more to do with how leadership is experienced.

Getting to the Source of the Problem

Most explanations for resistance to remote work focus on practical barriers. Early research emphasized concerns about technology, communication challenges, employee monitoring, or a lack of experience managing distributed teams. As organizations gained experience with virtual work, however, many of those barriers became less significant.

The researchers, Marissa Solomon Shandell, Courtney Elliott, and Adam Grant, explored a different possibility. Rather than focusing on organizational constraints,

they examined whether leader personality might influence attitudes toward remote work.

Specifically, they investigated narcissism—a personality trait characterized by a heightened desire for admiration, influence, and recognition. While narcissism exists on a spectrum and can sometimes contribute to confidence and boldness, leaders higher in narcissism are often particularly motivated to maintain authority, visibility, and social standing.

The researchers proposed that remote work may be threatening to these leaders because it limits opportunities to exercise control, command attention, and receive affirmation from others.

New Findings with Implications for Leadership

Across three studies involving Fortune 500 CEOs and hundreds of organizational leaders, the researchers found consistent evidence that leaders higher in narcissism were more resistant to remote work.

The reason was not simply that these leaders believed remote work harmed performance. Instead, resistance was linked to two underlying motivations: the desire for power and the desire for status.

Power reflects a leader's ability to influence, direct, and control others. In a traditional office environment, leaders can rely on physical presence, spontaneous interactions, direct observation, and immediate access to employees. Remote work changes that dynamic. Employees have greater autonomy, communication becomes more asynchronous, and leaders have fewer opportunities to monitor activity or exert influence through informal interactions.

Status reflects a leader's desire for admiration, recognition, and social standing. In-person environments provide countless signals that reinforce status—from office space and meeting dynamics to visible deference from others. Remote work can flatten many of those distinctions. Everyone appears in the same-sized video window. Opportunities for spontaneous recognition become less frequent. Signals of appreciation and influence become more ambiguous.

The researchers found that these threats to power and status help explain why some leaders oppose remote work even when organizational outcomes do not clearly justify doing so.

Perhaps most notably, the findings suggest that resistance to remote work may sometimes stem from what leaders lose rather than what organizations lose.



What This Means for Leaders

For leaders, the findings offer an opportunity for reflection.

Leadership decisions are rarely driven by organizational considerations alone. Every leader brings personal preferences, experiences, assumptions, and motivations to the choices they make. The challenge is recognizing when those factors may be influencing decisions in ways that are difficult to see.

When evaluating workplace policies, leaders should consider whether their concerns are truly rooted in organizational needs or whether they may also reflect personal preferences for visibility, influence, or control. Questions about collaboration, culture, and performance remain important. But leaders should be careful not to assume that discomfort with remote work automatically signals a business problem.

The study also highlights an important leadership capability: the ability to separate personal needs from organizational needs. Effective leaders recognize that authority does not depend on physical proximity and that influence can be exercised in many forms. Rather than relying on visibility or direct oversight, they focus on creating clarity, trust, accountability, and connection across different work arrangements.

More broadly, the findings remind us that leadership challenges often involve managing ourselves as much as managing others.

A Question Worth Asking

As organizations continue to navigate decisions about remote, hybrid, and in-person work, the most important question may not be where employees work. It may be why leaders prefer one arrangement over another.

The strongest leaders are willing to examine their own assumptions, motivations, and preferences alongside the evidence. By doing so, they create space for more thoughtful decisions—ones grounded not only in what feels familiar or comfortable, but in what best serves employees, teams, and organizational performance.

The future of work will continue to evolve. Leaders who approach that future with humility, self-awareness, and curiosity will be better positioned to build workplaces that are both effective and adaptive.



Access the full research paper here: Shandell, M. S., Elliott, C. E., & Grant, A. M. (2026). Worship me at the office altar: Why narcissistic leaders resist remote work. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 195, 104496.

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