

## Your bullying boss really is an idiot

GOT a bully for a boss? Take solace in research showing that leaders who feel incompetent really do lash out to temper their own inferiority.

When bosses feel they can't legitimately show superiority and competence, they take people down a notch or two, says Nathanael Fast of the University of Southern California in Los Angeles.

To see if a bruised ego can cause aggression, Fast and his colleague Serena Chen manipulated people's sense of power and self-worth by asking them to write about occasions when they felt either empowered or impotent and then either competent or incompetent.

Next, the volunteers selected a punishment suitable for students who gave wrong answers in a test, with a choice of horn sounds ranging from 10 decibels to a deafening 130 decibels.

The volunteers who felt the most incompetent but most empowered picked the loudest punishments - 71 decibels on average. Workers who felt up to their jobs selected quieter punishments, between 55 and 62 decibels, as did those primed to feel incompetent yet powerless (*Psychological Science*, DOI:10.1111/j.1467-9280.2009.02452.x).

Flattery helped. When Fast and Chen praised the leadership skills of their volunteers, the aggressive tendencies all but disappeared.

