Title: In search of the right touch: The challenge of assertiveness in leadership and social life

Abstract:
Our lives are filled with conflict, small and large. Many times each day, individuals and leaders must choose how to respond to the people around them whose plans and objectives differ from their own. Sometimes they push hard for their way, other times they may seek some middle ground, and still other times they might give up, give in, or simply turn away. My past work with collaborators suggests that this choice of how hard to push is not only a crucial one for leaders, but also one that leaders often get wrong in the eyes of onlookers. Some of my current work considers how aware people are of how their assertiveness comes across to others. One school of thought suggests that, to use colloquial terms, the jerks and wimps among us are predominantly self-aware, largely cognizant of how others see them and pursuing their course nonetheless. Our emerging evidence suggests otherwise, finding that while some people seen as over- and under-assertive do have accurate meta-perceptions (that is, they know how others see them), many do not. Inaccurate meta-perceptions on not restricted to jerks and wimps, though. A good number of people who come across to others as appropriately assertive mistakenly believe that they are seen as having 'crossed the line.'

In this talk, I'll try to make the case for why the question of meta-perceptions is important, I'll show evidence characterizing the degree and forms of distorted meta-perceptions, and I'll review some findings suggesting why such distortions might emerge. Multiple mechanisms are likely at work, including strategic misdirection by counterparts who may have a vested interest in keeping us in the dark.