

CHAPTER 2

Traits, Motives, and Characteristics of Leaders

The purpose of this chapter is to present a comprehensive description of the personal qualities of leaders. Such a presentation does not imply that the trait theory is more valid or important than other explanations of leadership. Nevertheless, “having the right stuff” contributes to leadership effectiveness in many situations.

CHAPTER OUTLINE AND LECTURE NOTES

The belief that certain personal characteristics and skills contribute to leadership effectiveness in many situations is the trait-based perspective on leadership. Traits tend to help us understand leadership behavior and effectiveness when integrated in meaningful ways. Old as well as new research concludes convincingly that effective leaders are made of the right stuff.

I. PERSONALITY TRAITS OF EFFECTIVE LEADERS

Possessing certain characteristics contributes to leadership effectiveness in many situations as long as the leader’s style fits the situation reasonably well.

A. General Personality Traits

A general personality trait in the context used here is a trait that would be observable within or outside the context of work. The same general traits are related to success and satisfaction in both work and personal life.

1. *Self-Confidence*. In almost every leadership setting, it is important for the leader to be realistically self-confident. Self-confidence is akin to being cool under pressure. Self-confidence was among the first leadership traits researchers identified, and currently receives considerable attention as a major contributor to leadership effectiveness.
2. *Humility*. Being humble at the right times also contributes to leadership effectiveness. Part of humility is admitting that you don’t know everything, and admitting your mistakes to team members and outsiders. According to Jim Collins, *Level 5 Leaders* are modest, yet determined to achieve their objectives.
3. *Core Self-Evaluations*. **Core self-evaluations** is a broad personality trait that captures bottom-line self-assessment, composed of self-esteem, locus of control, generalized self-efficacy, and emotional stability. All four traits are positively related to each other.
4. *Trustworthiness*. Group members consistently believe that leaders must display honesty, integrity, and credibility, thus engendering trust. **Trust** is a person’s confidence in another individual’s intentions and motives, and in the sincerity of that individual’s word. The popular cliché, “Leaders must walk the talk,” holds true. Also helpful is telling the truth and conducting yourself in the way that you ask others to

conduct themselves. A study found that 72 percent of employees believe their immediate managers act with honesty and integrity in their work, but only 56 percent believe that about company leadership. An example of a trust builder is to make your behavior consistent with your intentions.

A meta-analysis of 106 studies involving 27,103 individuals found that trust of a leader was highly associated with a variety of work attitudes of group members, such as satisfaction. The relationship between trust and job performance was positive, but low.

Being perceived as trustworthy is also important for entrepreneurs who are seeking investors, as suggested by a study conducted in the U.K. Credibility was enhanced by little things such as sending follow-up notes after a meeting with potential investors.

5. *Authenticity*. Embedded in the trait of being trustworthy is **authenticity**—being genuine and honest about your personality, values, and beliefs, as well as having integrity. To become an authentic leader, and to demonstrate authenticity, be yourself rather than attempting to be a replica of someone else.
6. *Extraversion*. Being extraverted contributes to leadership effectiveness, and extraverts are more likely to want to assume a leadership role and participate in group activities.
7. *Assertiveness*. **Assertiveness** refers to being forthright in expressing demands, opinions, feelings, and attitudes. Being assertive helps leaders perform tasks such as confronting group members, demanding higher performance, and making legitimate demands on higher management.
8. *Enthusiasm, Optimism, and Warmth*. Group members respond positively to enthusiasm, partly because enthusiasm may be perceived as a reward for constructive behavior. Enthusiasm also helps build good relationships with team members. Enthusiasm often takes the form of optimism which helps keep the group in an upbeat mood, and hopeful about attaining difficult goals. Being a warm person and projecting that warmth is part of enthusiasm and contributes to leadership effectiveness in several ways including giving emotional support.
9. *Sense of Humor*. The effective use of humor is considered an important part of a leader's role. Humor helps dissolve tension and defuse conflict. Self-effacing humor is the choice of comedians and organizational members alike. One of the research-based rules of humor is that higher-status people joke at a higher rate than those of lesser status, and tend to be more successful at eliciting laughter from others.

B. Task-Related Personality Traits

Certain personality traits of effective leaders are closely associated with task accomplishment even though they appear to be more accurately classified as traits than as behavior.

1. *Passion for the Work and the People*. A dominant characteristic of effective leaders is their passion for their work and to some extent for the people who help them

accomplish the work. Passion for the work is especially evident in entrepreneurial leaders and small-business owners who are preoccupied with growing their business. Being passionate about the nature of the business can be a major success factor in its survival. One of the ways for an entrepreneur to inject passion into a business is to tell a *creation story* (the company, not the Bible) that inspires people to understand how the company's product or cause will make the world a better place.

2. *Emotional Intelligence*. How well a person manages his or her emotions and those of others influences leadership effectiveness. **Emotional intelligence** refers to qualities such as understanding one's feelings, empathy for others, and the regulation of emotions to enhance living. Four key factors are included in emotional intelligence: (1) *self-awareness* helps you understand your impact on others; (2) *self-management* is the ability to control one's emotions and act with honesty and integrity in a consistent and adaptable manner; (3) *social awareness* includes having empathy for others and having intuition about organizational problems; (4) *relationship management* includes the interpersonal skills of communicating clearly and convincingly, disarming conflicts, and building strong personal bonds. Research suggests that a leader's moods and associated behaviors greatly influence bottom-line performance. A sense of humor is the most contagious mood.

A recent synthesis of research studies suggests that emotional intelligence is only one of various factors (including other personality traits, cognitive ability, and functional skills) that influence what leaders accomplish.

3. *Flexibility and Adaptability*. A leader must be flexible and adaptable enough to cope with change, especially because a leader is someone who facilitates change. **Flexibility**, or adjusting to situations, has long been recognized as an important leadership characteristic.
4. *Internal Locus of Control*. People with an **internal locus of control** believe that they are the primary cause of events happening to them. A leader with an internal locus is perceived as more powerful than one with an external locus because he or she assumes responsibility for events. (Locus of control is included in core self-evaluations.)
5. *Courage*. Leaders need the courage to take risks and to take the initiative. Courage in the present context refers to behaviors such as prudent risk taking, facing responsibility, and a willingness to put one's reputation on the line.

II. LEADERSHIP MOTIVES

Leaders can be differentiated from nonleaders and ineffective leaders in terms of their motives and needs. The motives described here are task-related.

A. The Power Motive

Effective leaders have a strong need to control resources. They vigorously exert power, think about how to alter the behavior of others, and care about status.

1. *Personalized Power Motive.* Leaders with a personalized power motive seek power mostly to further their own interests, and enjoy dominating others. Leaders with a personalized power motive do not worry about everybody liking them.
2. *Socialized Power Motive.* Leaders with a socialized power motive use power primarily to achieve organizational goals or a vision. These leaders are less defensive than those with a personalized power motive, and they are more willing to accept expert advice.

Note that the distinction between doing good for others and doing good for oneself is often made on the basis of very subjective criteria.

B. *The Drive and Achievement Motive*

Leaders are known for the strong effort they invest in achieving work goals. **Drive** refers to a propensity to put high energy into achieving goals. **Achievement motivation** refers to finding joy in accomplishment for its own sake.

C. *Tenacity and Resilience*

Leaders are better than nonleaders at overcoming obstacles. Tenacity multiplies in importance for organizational leaders because it can take so long to implement a new program. Resilience is part of tenacity because the tenacious person will bounce back from setback through continuous effort.

III. COGNITIVE FACTORS AND LEADERSHIP

Mental ability as well as personality is important for leadership success. Problem-solving and intellectual skills are referred to collectively as **cognitive factors**.

A. Cognitive (or Analytical) Intelligence

Strong problem-solving ability is a fundamental characteristic for effective leaders in all fields. Research spanning 100 years has demonstrated that leaders received higher scores than most people on mental ability tests. The relationship is likely to be higher when the leader plays an active role in decision making and is not overly stressed.

Cognitive intelligence is all the more useful for leadership when it is supplemented by **practical intelligence**, the ability to solve everyday problems by using experience-based knowledge to adapt to and shape the environment.

B. Knowledge of the Business or Group Task

An effective leader has to be technically or professionally competent in some discipline, particularly when leading a group of specialists. The importance of knowledge of the business is strongly recognized as an attribute of executive leadership. Knowledge of the business is critically important for strategy formulation.

C. Creativity

Many effective leaders are creative in the sense that they arrive at imaginative and original solutions to complex problems. Creative ability lies on a continuum, with one end being represented by business leaders who think of innovative products and services. At the other end of the continuum are leaders who rely on standard solutions to problems.

D. Insight into People and Situations

Another important cognitive trait of effective leaders is **insight**, a depth of understanding that requires considerable intuition and common sense. A manager with keen insight is able to make good choices in selecting people for key assignments. Insight also facilitates the leader's adapting his or her style to the situation. An in-demand leadership skill is to be able to read people from different cultures, and then negotiate cultural differences.

E. Farsightedness and Conceptual Thinking

To develop visions and incorporate strategy, a leader needs **farsightedness**, the ability to understand the long-range implications of actions and policies. Many of today's business leaders are accused of having a shortsighted emphasis on quick profits. Conceptual thinking refers to the ability to see the overall perspective and makes farsightedness possible. A conceptual thinker is also a *systems thinker*.

IV. THE INFLUENCE OF HEREDITY AND ENVIRONMENT ON LEADERSHIP

The traits, motives, and characteristics required for leadership effectiveness are a combination of heredity and environment. Personality traits and mental ability are based on certain inherited predispositions and aptitudes, which, however, require the right opportunity to develop. For example, a person may inherit high mental ability but needs the right experiences to learn to develop innovative solutions to problems facing the group. Leadership appears to be a combination of nature and nurture.

The outermost areas of the brain govern analytical thinking and technical skills, whereas the innermost areas of the brain govern emotions. A person therefore has the genes that influence the emotional intelligence necessary for leadership. However, experience is important for emotional intelligence because it increases with age.

Some leadership traits are more difficult to awaken or develop than others, with passion for work and people being an example.

V. THE STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE TRAIT APPROACH

The evidence is convincing that leaders possess different personal characteristics from those of nonleaders. A knowledge of the traits associated with leadership effectiveness helps in the selection of leaders. Awareness of these characteristics can also point a person toward the right developmental experiences, such as learning to become more assertive. The current emphasis on emotional intelligence, which is really a group of traits and behaviors, reinforces the importance of the trait approach. The trait approach is limited because it does not specify which traits are absolutely needed in which leadership situations and how much of each trait is needed. For example, when does ambition cross the line and become greed and gluttony?

Certain traits increase the probability of a person's becoming an effective leader, but the situation often influences which traits will be the most important.

VI. GUIDELINES FOR ACTION AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Considering that emotional intelligence is so important for leadership success, many organizations sponsor emotional intelligence training for managers. A realistic starting point in improving emotional intelligence on your own is to work with one of its five components at a time, such as empathy. You would first obtain feedback about your empathy, and then work diligently on any deficiency. After the attempted improvements in empathy, solicit more feedback.

A constructive application of trait theory is to think through which cluster of traits is most likely to lead to positive outcomes in the situation at hand. Finding the right cluster of traits to emphasize in a given situation is usually more useful than emphasizing one trait.

COMMENTS ON EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISES

Leadership Self-Assessment Quiz 2-1: How Self-Confident Are You?

Most people question their self-confidence at times, helping to make this quiz relevant. Also, self-confidence plays such a major role in leadership effectiveness across situations, it is well worth a student's time to think about self-confidence on a personal level.

Leadership Self-Assessment Quiz 2-2: Behaviors and Attitudes of Trustworthy Leader

Behavioral specifics of being trustworthy are particularly important because of the renewed emphasis on trustworthiness for leaders in recent years. A self-questionnaire about trustworthiness is likely to suffer from distortion and denial because most people consider themselves to be honest and trustworthy.

Leadership Skill-Building Exercise 2-1: A Sense of Humor on the Job

Asking students to develop situational humor serves two important purposes. Students quickly learn that making appropriate humorous comments requires skill, and the exercise raises their awareness of the importance of humor in leadership.

Leadership Skill-Building Exercise 2-2: Developing an Internal Locus of Control

An important potential contribution of this exercise is that it helps students examine concrete ways in which they might become self-directing, or develop an internal locus of control. Clichés about taking control of one's life are widely mentioned, but here is an opportunity to actualize the concept.

Leadership Self-Assessment Quiz 2-3: The Personal Resiliency Quiz

It is useful for people to think about their level of resiliency because virtually every successful person has to overcome adversity at some point in his or her career. Also, there appear to be a growing number of books and articles about the resiliency of leaders.

Leadership Skill-Building Exercise 2-3: Group Feedback on Leadership Traits

A cursory look at this exercise suggests that it is a form of what was referred to in the past as sensitivity training. This exercise, however, requires all positive feedback, thus decreasing the chances of emotional damage. We believe there is little risk of a participant's being judged as having no leadership traits or characteristics. (This would constitute very negative feedback.)

Leadership Skill-Building Exercise 2-4: My Leadership Portfolio

Reflecting on traits is valuable because it can point to specific areas for development. For example, many people need to search around to find an aspect of their field they might be passionate about.

Leadership Skill-Building Exercise 2-5: Analyzing the Traits, Motives, and Characteristics of a Well-Known Leader

This exercise provides an opportunity to carefully observe the traits, motives, and characteristics of a leader and at the same time think through what these attributes mean in practice. A good example is what it takes for a leader to appear to have good cognitive skills. What kind of profound statement does he or she have to make to appear intelligent? The CEO of MasterCard recently made a statement that seemed quite intelligent. He said something to the effect that the biggest potential market for his company was not present customers but the approximately 90 percent of the world that is still using cash.

COMMENTS ON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

1. How much faith do voters place in the trait theory of leadership when they elect public officials?

Most voters place high implicit faith in the trait theory of leadership because many of their judgments about candidates are based on perceived traits. Television and Internet video appearances by candidates serve as a major source of information about the candidates' traits. An example is that many people perceived president Obama to be emotionally calm and reserved, and quite cerebral based on his television presentations. Obama then worked hard at displaying more emotion, such as making jokes and laughing thereby softening his image among many constituents.

2. Suppose a college student graduates with a major for which he or she lacks enthusiasm. What might this person do about becoming a passionate leader?

The bold approach would be for this person to make an early career switch into a field he or she cared about, such as a management major shifting to social work. A less bold approach would be to search for an activity in his or her field that is intrinsically exciting. For example, some people are passionate about preparing PowerPoint slides even though they are neutral or negative toward other aspects of the job. The person could then focus on these slides as a source of passion in his or her

3. Explain how being highly self-confident in a given leadership situation might not be an advantage.

Leaders who are highly self-confident face several risks. One is that they do not listen carefully enough to input from subordinates because they think they have all the wisdom and information they need. Another problem with being highly self-confident is that it can lead to an image of arrogance which can lead to a negative perception by subordinates. In general, a leader showing some humility leads to a positive perception.

4. What would a manager to whom you report have to do to convince you that he or she has emotional intelligence?

The answer to this question is a function of what emotional intelligence means to the individual. Typical indicators of emotional intelligence in a manager would be not having bouts of anger, relating comfortably to people in the group, and building relationships with people outside the group.

5. Describe any leader or manager, whom you know personally or have watched on television who is unenthusiastic. What effect did the lack of enthusiasm have on group members?

The presumed effect of low enthusiasm by the leader or manager would be low enthusiasm by group members. However, enthusiastic group members who are highly self-reliant, or have a strong internal locus of control, would not be dampened by the unenthusiastic manager. One student said that the university's president was so unenthusiastic that she thought he was not interested in students. As a consequence, she felt less positively about the university.

6. What would lead you to conclude that a leader was non-authentic (phony)?

For many workers, a sure-fire indicator of a manager being phony would be acting polite and cordial toward members of management, and customers, and being rude and inconsiderate toward workers in his or her own department. Another key indicator of phoniness would be to frequently compliment a worker, and then give that worker a low performance evaluation.

7. What are your best-developed leadership traits, motives, and characteristics? How do you know?

Part of this answer could come from feedback the person has received, such as having received many compliments for being enthusiastic or having good problem-solving ability. Another part of the answer could come from introspection about leadership tasks the person has performed well. For example, the person might think he or she has high resilience based on having helped a group work through a high-pressure situation such as lacking funds.

8. Provide an example of a leader you have observed who appears to have good cognitive intelligence, yet is lacking in practical intelligence.

It probably won't be easy for students to find a good example because most people who find their way into a leadership position have at least an average degree of practical intelligence. A possible example might be a highly intelligence inventor/entrepreneur who starts a company to manufacture and market his brilliant idea. However, this person has limited practical intelligence leading him or her to insult and turn away potential investors.

9. Which do you think is the most outstanding leadership trait, motive, or characteristic of the person teaching this class? Explain your answer.

The more humble instructors among us might feel a little embarrassment if informed of these answers. The important point is that the student supports his or her answer with some reasonable evidence. For example, a student might note that the professor/instructor is highly enthusiastic.

The student should then give several examples of the manner in which the instructor expressed enthusiasm, such as raving about the results of a group project.

10. Many people who disagree with the trait approach to leadership nevertheless still conduct interviews when hiring a person for a leadership position. Why is conducting such interviews inconsistent with their attitude toward the trait approach?

Conducting interviews is inconsistent with an anti-trait approach because a major purpose of the interview is to assess personal characteristics that would be related to job effectiveness. Another purpose of the interview is to assess interpersonal skills, which are closely related to traits. If the interview were simply used to discuss the terms of employment and to assess experience, then the interview would not be inconsistent with a trait approach.

PLAUSIBLE RESPONSES TO CASE QUESTIONS

Leadership Case Problem A: Store Manager, Ensign Jimmy Badger

This case illustrates the growing practice of retail-store chains to hire former junior military officers, as well as some of the challenges these former military officers might face.

1. Which leadership characteristics of Jimmy Badger are revealed in this case?

Jimmy Badger is certainly assertive about such matters as parking lot cleanliness. He appears to be authentic in that he sticks to his principles. Badger's passion shows through as he attempts to set high performance standards for his store. His strong drive and achievement motive are also reflected in the high performance standards he is trying to establish.

2. To what extent should Jimmy modify his leadership approach?

Jimmy might need to move more slowly in expecting such leaps in performance from store associates, at least as perceived by store associates. Top-management at the retail chain, however, probably likes what Jimmy is attempting to accomplish.

3. What do you think of the home-improvement store's positive bias toward hiring former military officers for its management training program?

A positive bias toward former junior officers is most likely positive in most respects. The teamwork and discipline for former military officers is most likely an asset in the stores. However, people with other types of experience should not be excluded from consideration because if they are excluded they are being discriminated against. For example, a former restaurant manager or assistant manager might be effective in a store leadership role.

Associated Role Play

A couple of focal points in this role play are notable. Lola Sanchez does not want to discourage Jimmy Badger, yet she sees room for improvement. Another focal point is whether proud Jimmy can take a little constructive criticism. Having been a military officer, he should be able to profit from criticism.

Leadership Case Problem B: Amy Touchstone Wants to Shape Up the Club

This case illustrates how demanding even a basic leadership assignment can require many leadership characteristics and behaviors.

1. What personal characteristics of a leader should Touchstone emphasize in bringing about improvements of the East End Athletic Club?

Touchstone would need to emphasize cognitive skills to facilitate developing action plans for sprucing up the club. To help convey the need for improvement, she should demonstrate passion for the tasks and enthusiasm.

2. What leadership roles (review Chapter 1) should Touchstone emphasize in bringing about improvements in the operation of the Club?

Emphasizing the technical problem solver role would be a useful starting point because Touchstone wants to improve the operation of the club. Because Touchstone would be working directly with staff members, she should also emphasize the coach and motivator role. Touchstone might need funds to bring about improvements, so she will have to emphasize the negotiator role also.

3. What do you recommend that Touchstone do next to carry out her leadership responsibility of improving operations?

A useful starting point would be to meet with the staff to discuss her plans and solicit advice. She should also discuss the customer feedback with the staff members to get their reactions. Touchstone might also delegate a few responsibilities for improvement, such as find a constructive way of getting members to stop leaving towels on the floor.

Associated Role Play

This role play represents one of the most important activities of a leader—discussing the need for a change in operations with group members. A focal point is how effective Amy is in coming across as a constructive and assertive, without being autocratic. It will be interesting to see if the subordinates have mixed reactions to Amy's demands.