



Leadership & Performance

A Trait-Based Approach to Leadership: Are Leaders born or made?

CQ Dossier | Evidence-based Leadership

The Author:

Dr. Annette Towler

Annette Towler was born in England and now lives in the United States. She has a PhD in Industrial and Organizational Psychology and has taught at several institutions. Annette has published in several journals, including Journal of Applied Psychology, Personnel Psychology, Human Resource Development Quarterly, and Organizational Research Methods. She worked in the public and private sector for many years, primarily as a management trainer.



CQ Net is the evidence-based management (EBM) team learning platform. Learn strategies & interventions that have been supported by scientific research. This CQ Dossier is part of the Evidence-Based Management Learning Team "How can leadership enhance team and company performance?".

Executive summary

This CQ Dossier discusses the trait-based approach to leadership and reviews those personality traits that distinguish effective from ineffective leaders. The dossier also identifies key skills or competencies that are related to leader effectiveness and can be used by organizations for selection, promotion, and training.

Effective leadership is a question of selection and skill development

The question of whether leaders are born or made is a perennial argument among leadership scholars (Bass, 1990). In pondering this question, philosophers and scientists have argued either that genetics and stable dispositions are the foundation for effective leadership or that environmental opportunities contribute to leader emergence. The preponderance of leadership courses suggests that many believe leadership can be created but the lack of rigorous longitudinal studies of leader development makes it difficult to obtain an accurate measure of how leaders are shaped (Conger, 1992). It is probably best for organizations to adopt an interactionist approach and create interventions that focus on both skill development and identification of individuals who demonstrate effective leader traits.

Several of the big-five personality traits are related to leadership effectiveness

This CQ Dossier focuses on [the Big-Five personality traits and reviews those traits](#) that are related to leader effectiveness. In addition, the dossier reviews those skills that are related to leadership effectiveness, so organizations can create meaningful training interventions that allow managers to hone and sharpen their leadership skills. There have been numerous reviews on which traits are related to leader effectiveness. Tim Judge and colleagues conducted a statistical review of the literature (meta-analysis) and found that several of the Big Five personality traits were related to leader effectiveness (Judge et al., 2002).

First, **extroversion** was positively related to leadership and represents the tendency to be sociable, assertive, active, energetic, and full of zeal (Judge et al., 2002). Extroverts tend to be warm, enthusiastic, outgoing, and friendly (Costa & McCrae, 1991). The strong interpersonal element associated with this personality trait demonstrates why extroversion is a valid predictor of leader effectiveness. Extroverts are also skilled in non-verbal communication, are effective speakers, and are also adept at presenting themselves in a positive light (Riggio, 1986).

Conscientious individuals are orderly, cautious, hardworking, and achievement-oriented (Mount & Barrick, 1995). Conscientiousness is comprised of two facets—achievement and dependability—and these interdependent facets are both related to leader effectiveness (Judge et al., 2002).

Agreeable individuals are cheerful, adventurous, adaptable, friendly, likeable, generous, tolerant, and courteous (Barrick & Mount, 1991). They are less apt to be rude and verbally aggressive. Agreeable individuals have empathy for others and are generally altruistic. In the meta-analysis conducted by Judge and colleagues there was no relationship between agreeableness and leader effectiveness. However, Judge and Bono (2000) found agreeableness was a predictor of transformational leadership, accounting for 7% of the variance in transformational leader behavior. In a review of empirical articles that focused on military performance, agreeableness emerged as a predictor of military leadership (Vickers, 1995).

Openness to experience has emerged as a broad construct, encompassing originality, curiosity, imagination, broadmindedness and intelligence (Mount & Barrick, 1995). Individuals who score high on openness to experience tend to be nonconformists, unconventional, and prefer autonomy. In the Judge meta-analysis, openness to experience was positively related to leader effectiveness.

Neurotic individuals tend to be anxious, insecure, nervous and apprehensive (Mount & Barrick, 1995). Neurotic individuals exhibit poor emotional adjustment and can be hostile in stressful situations. Not surprisingly, in the meta-analysis conducted by Judge and colleagues, neuroticism was negatively related to leader effectiveness (Judge et al., 2002).

Skill theories emphasis more malleable characteristics of leadership effectiveness

The research shows that the Big Five personality factors are useful predictors of leader effectiveness and organizations can use these personality factors to identify, promote and train effective leaders. The Big Five are distal predictors of leader effectiveness. The research on individual characteristics and leadership effectiveness has also focused on more proximal, malleable characteristics of leadership. One of the issues with a focus on identifying traits associated with successful leadership is that traits are relatively fixed from an early age. The skills theory of leadership grew from this flaw. There are several skills theories and they all focus on those characteristics that distinguished effective from ineffective leaders. One of the best known and well-validated theories is by Mumford and colleagues.

Problem solving, social judgement and knowledge are key abilities of effective leaders

The skills approach states that skills, knowledge, and abilities are required for a leader to be effective (Mumford et al., 2000). This approach suggests that many people have leadership potential and if they are given rich opportunities for development, they can become effective leaders. This skills-based approach incorporates five important elements – individual attributes, competencies, leadership outcomes, career experiences, and environmental influences – as being important predictors of effective leadership. However, the most important element is competencies incorporating ability in problem solving, social judgment, and knowledge. These three elements work together and separately to enable development of leader effectiveness.

Problem-solving skills are creative abilities that leaders utilize to solve ambiguous and difficult organizational problems. Leaders who are adept in problem-solving skills can define problems, gather information, and develop alternatives for solving the problem within the context of the organization.

Leaders with excellent **social judgement skills** can effectively work with others to lead change, solve problems, and make sense of issues. Leaders who have social judgment skills are adept in perspective taking, social perceptiveness, demonstrate behavioral flexibility, and social performance. Through perspective taking, effective leaders are empathic in solving problems and actively seek out knowledge regarding people. Effective leaders also demonstrate social perceptiveness through knowing how others will react in the midst of [organizational change](#). They are also flexible in their behavior when confronted with other people's attitudes and intended actions, understanding that there are many paths to achieve change. The social performance competency reflects being skills in several aspects of leadership, such as the ability to persuade and communicate the vision to others in the organization, the ability to mediate and to coach and mentor subordinates.

This skills-based approach to leader effectiveness also acknowledges the **importance of knowledge and cognitive ability** to allow for leaders to show intelligence in making decisions regarding the firm. In addition, motivation and personality traits such as tolerance for ambiguity, creativity and curiosity are core characteristics for effective leadership (Mumford et al., 2000).

Organizations can utilize the trait-based and skill-based approach to identify and develop leaders

In conclusion, organizations can utilize the traits-based and skills-based approach to identify individuals who show leader potential. This approach focuses on those individuals who have the potential to do well in a leader position. Moreover, the approach suggests that organizations can use these approaches to promote and train individuals who demonstrate these leader competencies and traits.

Key take-aways

- The traits-based approach to leadership is an important tool for organizations to select leaders
- The Big Five Personality traits can be used as a model for selection and training
- The Skills-based approach to leadership focuses on core competences that are more malleable and proximal than traits
- A skills-based approach allows organizations to identify and develop those individuals that demonstrate competencies of problem-solving, social judgement, and social competence.

References

Bass, B. M. (1990). Bass and Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership: Theory, research, and managerial applications. 3rd edition. New York: Free Press.

Conger, J. A. (1992). *Learning to Lead*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc.

Costa, P. T., & McCrae, R. R. (1991). The NEO Personality Inventory Manual. Odessa, Florida: Psychological Assessment Resources.

Judge, T. A., & Bono, J. E. (2000). Five-factor model of personality and transformational leadership. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 85, 751-765.

Judge, T. A., Bono, J. E., Ilies, R., & Gerhardt, M. W. (2002). Personality and leadership: A qualitative and quantitative review. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87, 4, 765-780.

Riggio, R. E. (1986). Assessment of basic social skills. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51, 3, 649-660.

Mount, M. K., & Barrick, M. R. (1995). The Big Five Personality dimensions. In K. M. Rowland & G. R. Ferris, (Eds.). *Research in Personnel and Human Resource Management*, 13, 153-200.

Mumford, M. D., Zaccaro, S. J., Harding, F. D., Jacobs, T. O., & Fleishman, E. A. (2000). Leadership skills for a changing world: Solving complex social problems. *Leadership Quarterly*, 11, 1, 11- 35.

Vicker, R. R. (1995). Using personality assessment for leadership selection. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.

CQ Net is the evidence-based
management team learning platform

**From speculation to impact. Learn how
evidence-based management can make a
difference for you and your organization.**



Evidence-based

Our learning teams bridge the gap between social sciences and business such that evidence-based knowledge becomes accessible for managers and professionals.



Agile learning

Our agile team learning approach connects evidence-based knowledge with real life challenges. This increases learning transfer, is a great deal of fun.



100% online

We apply secure cutting edge Open Source Technology for time & space independent online collaboration.



Co-creation

The combination of evidence-based knowledge with the learning team members' individual experiences provides the perfect starting point for knowledge co-creation.

WHO WE ARE

CQ Net is the evidence-based management (EBM) team learning platform. Learn strategies & interventions that have been supported by scientific research.

Follow us on

[Linkedin](#)/[Twitter](#)/[Facebook](#)

WHY CHOOSE US

1. Learn what really counts based on cutting edge science.
2. Learn time & space independent in a safe online platform.
3. Learn from & with others in a team setting that motivates.
4. Learn about the most pressing "Human Factor" issues.