



Leadership Success: Does Personality Matter?

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One of the most baffling issues to re-emerge in leadership research is the role of personality in leadership success. Despite the fact that it is by now clear that someone who is a great leader in one setting may be a less-than-desirable fit in another setting, we do find that some personality types are generally more likely to bring success in leadership. Personality (or trait) approaches to leadership success were discredited when I was a graduate student, but they have re-emerged with a vengeance these days. At that earlier time, people did not even agree on which traits were most important to study not to mention the fact that everyone defined them and measured them in different ways. Anyway, I was a graduate student quite a while back (hint: Ronald Reagan was president). Things are different now. Currently, you cannot go anywhere in research psychology circles without hearing about the “The Big Five” trait taxonomy.

What are personality traits anyway? Simply stated, personality traits are habitual ways of responding that are fairly stable over time and, according to some researchers, they are at least partly influenced by heredity. They are measured most often through self-report questionnaires but sometimes by observer ratings. The Big Five, also referred to as the Five Factor Model (FFM), can trace its roots to early psychologists (Klages, 1926; Baumgarten, 1933; Allport and Odbert 1936) who attempted to develop a taxonomy to distinguish individuals from one another based on the natural language of personality description. Cattell (1943) used

both semantic and empirical clustering procedures. Given that countless personality measures based on many different theories of human behavior exist, it was a relief for scholars that factor analytic techniques conducted on personality data gathered over many decades began to uncover five major dimensions of personality. This five factor structure has been replicated many times and, after an initial low level of interest, there was a real comeback for personality research in the 1990s. In very recent years, researchers are studying personality and culture and are learning that The Big Five factors express themselves slightly differently in different cultures (Cheung, 2004; McCrae, Terracciano et al., 2005; Tsaousis & Nikolaou, 2001). In fact, a fair amount of research is focused on the extent to which the five factors predict success among leaders in different cultures, although it is still too early to make many generalizations about these findings.

The Big Five personality traits include (see John and Srivastava, 1999) the following:

Big Five Dimensions:

- (1) Extraversion vs. Introversion
- (2) Agreeableness vs. Antagonism
- (3) Conscientiousness vs. Lack of direction
- (4) Neuroticism vs. Emotional stability
- (5) Openness vs. Closedness to experience

Some of the Correlates:

- Gregarious, assertive, energetic
- Trusting, altruistic, modest
- Organized, self-disciplined, dutiful
- Anxious, self-conscious, impulsive, discontented
- Creative, excitable, unconventional

A recent trend in the Industrial/Organizational psychology literature has been the use of meta-analysis, that is, analyzing the strength of relationships between variables by examining the effects obtained across a large number of studies that are comparable to one another. A significant meta-analysis (Judge, Bono, Ilies, and Gerhardt, 2002) that was conducted across 222 correlations obtained in 73 studies provides much of our understanding of the Big Five and leadership. In a nutshell, Judge and colleagues found that four of The Big Five Traits were significantly tied to leadership performance. Overall, across settings, good leadership was correlated with low Neuroticism (-.24), high Extraversion (.31), high Conscientiousness (.28) and high Openness to Experience (.24). Interestingly, Agreeableness (.08) was not an important predictor of leadership. The “nice guy” was not necessarily the best leader or an effective one; but, at least Agreeableness was not negatively correlated with leadership outcome!

The authors further broke down the results of leadership success studies into those examining *leader emergence*, which has to do with who becomes a leader, and *leader effectiveness*, which is how people perform once they are in leadership roles. Their measures of leadership were based on others’ ratings, rankings, or nominations. Trait predictors of leader emergence and leader effectiveness differed somewhat. While extraversion was the most consistent correlate of overall leadership, it was more strongly related to leader emergence than it was to leader effectiveness. Clearly, extraversion helps people to be noticed and to assert themselves

in places where there are opportunities for leadership to occur. It also is not a bad trait to have once you are in a leadership position. Conscientiousness was also more strongly related to leader emergence than it was to leader effectiveness. It is thought that the abilities of Conscientious individuals to organize themselves and follow through on initiatives may help them to stand out in a group.

The Judge et al meta-analysis further considered the importance of The Big Five in three different settings, two of which I will mention here. (I assume you are not so interested in students interacting in temporary laboratory groups.) Two of the groups compared were government/military leaders (e.g., studies of military officers, government employees, political leaders) and business leaders (e.g., studies of managers, supervisors or executives). In business settings, success was correlated with low Neuroticism, high Extraversion and high Openness, with extraversion being the strongest correlate overall. Agreeableness and, get this, Conscientiousness was *unrelated* to leadership outcomes and thus did not matter. As for government/military settings, low Neuroticism, high Extraversion, and high Conscientiousness were all important, with low levels of Neuroticism (or conversely, high emotional stability) being the most important for leadership success. It appears that the kind of creativity suggested by Openness to Experience is likely to be essential for continuous business innovation but does not predict military/government leadership. And, apparently, the public holds its military and government leaders to higher standards of self-discipline and duty than it holds its business leaders.

Important to note is that personality makes a contribution to leadership success that is above and beyond that made by the leader's level of intelligence, or cognitive ability. The average correlation between cognitive ability and leadership is between .25 and .30 (Forsyth, 2006) so it does not predict leadership success to a greater degree than Extraversion does. Interestingly, the literature shows that leaders' cognitive ability does *not* tend to exceed their followers' mean cognitive ability by a wide margin. It is generally believed that people feel more comfortable and trust leaders who possess cognitive ability not too far from their own. Similarity rather than discrepancy on this trait enhances communication and helps people to feel that their leaders are similar to them in other ways, such as in interests and values.

The idea that there are many different types of "intelligences" has been discussed in psychology at least as early as Thorndike (1920). But emotional and social intelligence have recently become very big concepts, not only in the research literature, but in the popular press as well. The concept of multiple intelligences has sold very well in the marketplace. The amount of critique regarding the lack of clarity and agreement in the definition and measurement of these extra intelligences is almost as large as the tomes written about them. Generally speaking, emotional intelligence is seen as a subset of the larger domain of social intelligence, and it is usually focused more specifically on being aware of and sensitive to the emotional states of oneself and others, being able to regulate one's own emotions effectively, and being able to respond effectively to others in a way that can influence emotion. Social intelligence usually is focused more generally on various interpersonal skills and awareness. A good part of the critique of the literature on social/emotional intelligence is that it is not clear whether they account for additional variance in leadership success beyond that accounted for by The Big Five plus cognitive ability. I expect that, for some time, all of these concepts will continue to be measured and sized up with respect to their predictability because everyone has their favorites.

Nevertheless, we should be careful not to throw out the baby with the bath water. Sticking to only a few big, general traits is not terribly interesting and not terribly practical. In general, the more you consider the big, general traits such as The Big Five, the more you are able to predict overall, general leadership success as a gross measure. However, if you want to predict leadership success in a more specific situation, you are better off measuring traits that are more specifically associated with the needs of that position. Some leadership positions call

for sales ability (being convincing), whereas others call for more creativity and openness, and while still others require close connections with a loyal leadership team. There is still a lot of room for psychologists and others to contribute to the analysis of position requirements and success and to assess the extent to which particular individuals fill those shoes. Many argue that just because The Big Five are clearly defined and important, it does not mean that other, more specific, qualities are unimportant. The Big Five has been a good organizing umbrella for many of the aspects of personality and other traits that are being studied. It is safest to acknowledge a central psychological principle described by one of the fathers of organizational psychology, Kurt Lewin. That is, $B = f(P, E)$, or behavior is a function of the interaction between the person and the environment. Many factors can modify the relationship between personality and leadership success.

To return to the original question of whether personality matters for leadership success, the answer seems to be a resounding "yes." It does matter in a significant way. We know what global traits are generally most important for leader emergence and leader effectiveness. But this point is only a start for the organizational consultant or coach. The low to moderate correlations for most measures, such as cognitive ability, the Big Five, and various measures of emotional intelligence indicate that leader emergence and effectiveness in any given situation are affected by many factors specific to a particular work environment, some not within the leader's control. While some traits, such as Conscientiousness and Agreeableness, do not appear as significant predictors for leader effectiveness in business settings, there are clearly situations where a lack of these traits will cause tremendous trouble and undo success far more quickly than it was earned. Future research needs to focus on leadership success as a function of the interaction between the person and the environment as well as an understanding of the early signs of leader decline (e.g., McCall and Lombardo, 1983).

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