

Behaving Intelligently: Leadership Traits & Characteristics

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Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln, Napoleon...what do these people have in common? Most individuals would consider these people to be some of the greatest leaders of all time. Can you think of other great leaders? What makes a great leader? These were some of the questions leading to the first organized attempts to study leadership. In the early twentieth century, leadership traits were studied to determine what made certain people great leaders. Since then, however, it has been proven that although traits may be part of the picture, they are by no means the entire picture. In this publication, we will discuss the history and significance of leadership traits, introduce the Individual Differences Framework and personality factors important to effective leadership, and conclude with the strengths behind the trait leadership perspective.

History of Trait Leadership

The story of leadership begins not all that long ago in the late 1800s. Common thoughts back then suggested that leaders were born and not made. (This myth has since been disproven—refer to ELK publication 1-100 for more details.) These perceptions originated out of an observation that many great leaders possessed something out of the ordinary—natural, inborn characteristics that allowed them to excel above the rest (what was ultimately called the “Great Man” leadership theory). This perception translated into limited opportunities for leadership among the common people, as they were not endowed with these “special” leadership characteristics. Some of these traits included being especially courageous, having the ability to show initiative, and having integrity or extraordinarily high intelligence or perception. However, research did not end up supporting this hypothesis and came back disappointingly negative.

TRAITS ALONE DO NOT DEFINE LEADERS

Researchers compared leaders and followers and looked for obvious differences. Even after comparing aspects such as IQ, personality qualities and personal characteristics, no consistent trends were found. There was little evidence to justify the “Great Man” theory. Certain traits were found to be important, but the bottom line was that effective leadership truly depended upon the situation. Today, modern theorists consider leadership to be a complex interaction between traits, behaviors and situational characteristics.

Still, leadership traits do comprise an important piece of the leadership equation. The trait approach within leadership began with an emphasis on identifying the qualities of great people, but it has now shifted back to putting emphasis on the critical role of traits in effective leadership.

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Significant Leadership Traits

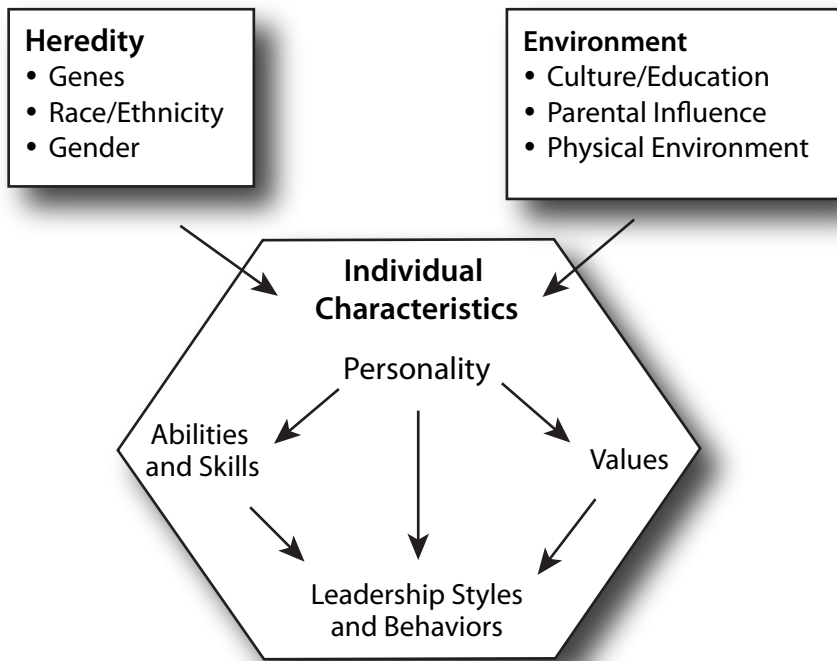
As mentioned above, effective leadership often relies upon certain traits held by the leader. Overall, individuals within leadership roles tend to differ from group members in several important ways. Effective leaders tend to be:

- ▶ More sociable
- ▶ Aggressive
- ▶ Original (creative)
- ▶ Popular
- ▶ Humorous
- ▶ Intelligent
- ▶ Alert
- ▶ Insightful
- ▶ Responsible
- ▶ Able to take initiative
- ▶ Persistent
- ▶ Self-confident

These leadership traits are important, but it should be noted that individuals do not become leaders solely because they possess certain traits. More accurately, the traits a leader possesses need to be relevant to the situation in which the leader is performing. So leadership effectiveness is based upon the working relationship between the leader and other group members—or the appropriateness of the fit between the leader and followers.

Individual Differences Framework (IDF)

Leadership can be defined relatively straightforwardly as *influencing people towards a shared goal*; in this definition, every leader is still unique. What makes every leader special is a combination of factors, including demographic, physical, psychological and behavioral differences. Determining that effective leadership was about much more than just certain characteristics, researchers designed a framework to illustrate how different aspects contribute to the leadership equation.



Environmental and social conditions can reinforce patterns that influence a leader's personality; a good example of this is the cultural expectation within the United States for males to be more competitive and aggressive, which often influences their behavior as leaders.

Figure 1. Individual Differences Framework (IDF). Source: Nahavandi, 2006.

The Individual Differences Framework was developed to illustrate individual differences and their complex components. Two important factors that determine individual leadership characteristics are heredity and the environment. Heredity can be considered characteristics handed down genetically—these factors include genetic patterns, race or ethnicity and gender. Environment is the setting in which individuals are raised or exposed to throughout their life. Aspects such as cultural factors, the educational system, and parental upbringing are all part of the environment. Both of these factors (heredity and environment) interact to influence the development of individual differences we see exhibited in different leaders. Environmental and social conditions can reinforce patterns that influence a leader's personality; a good example of this is the cultural expectation within the United States for males to be more competitive and aggressive, which often influences their behavior as leaders. Ultimately, our genetic makeup and what we are exposed to helps to make us the leader that we are.

Individual characteristics can be broken down into four categories:

- **Personality** is considered a stable set of physical characteristics; these specific features are stable, although they may evolve gradually over time. It is important to note that this is a set of characteristics, not just one or two. (More on Personality later.)
- **Values** are stable, long-lasting beliefs or preferences that are shaped early in life by parents, upbringing and culture. These characteristics illustrate what we consider worthwhile and desirable, right and wrong, and play a key role in decision-making and problem-solving.
- **Abilities and skills** can be defined as a natural or acquired talent for doing something. Ability is natural and somewhat stable; skills are acquired and change with training and experience. You cannot train leaders to develop ability, but you can train for leadership skills; therefore, recruit and hire leaders with specific abilities and then train them to exhibit the desired skills.
- **Leadership style and behavior** is the final component of the IDF framework. These are personal choices made by the leader as to the type of leadership style and behavior they will exhibit according to the situation. To be an effective leader, the most important element is knowing the appropriate leadership style/behavior for the situation and understanding the results of one's actions.

Although being adaptable as a leader is often necessary, it also can be challenging and ultimately push us to our limits. Thus, it is important to be familiar with the different components making up your own IDF.

Behavioral range refers to a leader's normal range of personality and values (outside of his/her IDF) exhibited in leadership roles. Individual characteristics are relatively stable; however leaders can behave in ways inconsistent with their personality and values—working outside of their behavioral range. A good example of this is a leader who prefers to delegate but encounters a situation in which he needs to provide extensive direction to new volunteers. Or a leader who is generally very introverted being put into a situation where she needs to be overly extroverted. Although being adaptable as a leader is often necessary, it also can be challenging and ultimately push us to our limits. Thus, it is important to be familiar with the different components making up your own IDF and understand when, as a leader, you are extending yourself beyond your Individual Differences Framework. Preferably, acting beyond your behavioral range should be saved for extreme or unusual circumstances, or necessary short bursts.

Five-Factor Personality Model and Leadership

Personality is a main component of a leader's personal characteristics and plays a significant role within the Individual Differences Framework. Within the last few years, there has been a consensus on the basic factors of what we consider *personality*. These factors are outlined below:

- **Neuroticism**—the tendency to be depressed, anxious, insecure, vulnerable, and hostile
- **Extraversion**—the tendency to be sociable and assertive and to have positive energy
- **Openness**—the tendency to be informed, creative, insightful, and curious
- **Agreeableness**—the tendency to be accepting, conforming, trusting and nurturing
- **Conscientiousness**—the tendency to be thorough, organized, controlled, dependable, and decisive

All leaders exhibit each of these personality factors to some degree, and it appears that having certain personality traits is associated with being a more effective leader. For example, extraversion has been shown to be the factor most strongly associated with leadership; agreeableness has been illustrated to have only a weak association. (NOTE: If you are particularly interested in learning more about your personality makeup and addressing some of the above mentioned factors, you may want to check into taking the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator [MBTI].)

Strengths of Trait Leadership

Recognizing that specific traits are important to effective leadership is important for several reasons. First of all, this notion fits clearly with the one that suggests that leaders are inherently different; they are individuals who are “out front” and “leading the way,” which allows us to focus on other characteristics that make them unique. Some of these traits are ingrained upon a leader early in life, but just as many of them can be enhanced and improved throughout life. In addition, sometimes effective leadership is more of a mark of successfully matching a leader (and their unique skills and characteristics) with the appropriate situation, rather than changing or developing specific leadership characteristics.

This viewpoint allows us to focus solely on the leaders themselves. As a result, we end up with a more complete understanding of how the leader and his/her personality relates to the process of leadership. Finally, clearly understanding what traits and characteristics are exhibited by effective leaders allows us not only to match the right leader with the right situation but also to discover benchmarks for what we need to look for if we want to be (or train) the best leaders we can.

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Step Out & Apply:

What leadership traits mentioned above (*see Significant Leadership Traits*) do I feel I exhibit strongly? List the top 5:

Within the Individual Differences Framework illustrated above, *ability and skills* are a key factor within a leader's individual characteristics. Consider the statement "You cannot train leaders to develop ability, but you can train for leadership skills; therefore, recruit and hire leaders with specific abilities and then train them to exhibit the desired skills."

What specific **abilities** do you feel are important (or would you recruit for) for volunteers to have within your group or organization?

What specific leadership **skills** do you consider important to train volunteers for within your group or organization?

Which of the five personality factors (listed within *Five-Factor Personality Model and Leadership*) do you feel is the hardest for you to do naturally? How about the second most difficult? Identify your top two most challenging personality factors, and a specific way in which this affects you when you take on leadership roles.

1.

2.

References & Background Reading

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