

Leadership is a Learned Skill

"The one quality that can be developed by studious reflection and practice is the leadership of men."

- Dwight D. Eisenhower

Leadership ability consists of learned skills that are developed throughout a leader's career. Of course, like most abilities, there are many factors in addition to learning that impact leadership competence, including one's personality traits and other inherited abilities. The scientific community has examined extensive data over the years on leadership emergence by using identical twin (MZA twins) studies to analyze the connection between genetics and leadership ability.

The overall conclusion from one of the most extensive meta-analytic studies conducted on the subject (Ilies, Gerhardt, & Le, 2004) concludes that 17% of leadership emergence can be attributed to inheritance. This study, as with most studies on genetically inherited leadership skills, focused on what is known as the "Big Five" personality traits: (1) Emotional Stability, (2) Extraversion, (3) Openness, (4) Agreeableness, and (5) Conscientiousness. The finding of 17% was calculated by combining the Big Five traits with cognitive ability (IQ scores). While this definitely reveals that there is some genetic component to leadership ability, it also reveals that significant majority of it is learned.

Can Personality Tests Be Used For Selecting Leaders?

Certainly there is evidence which suggests some leadership aptitude can be predicted through assessing personality traits as part of the selection process. However, the tools used to measure personality are fraught with error, rendering the results far from certain. Therefore, predicting success through the selection process is not the lone silver bullet for selecting leaders. Personality theorist Seymour Epstein commented on one of the critical problems with using psychological trait categories ("factors") to understand personality: "Rather than explaining behavior, they themselves require explaining." This is an important hurdle to overcome, as it reveals face validity problems associated with personality testing at the time of selection. For example, while we do know that intelligence (as measured by IQ) is correlated to leadership ability, it is difficult to prove how the talent for flipping 3D shapes or to solve brain teasers correlates to say, motivational speaking or excellent customer service skills.

The truth about strong leadership ability goes way beyond genetic inheritance. House and Mitchell (1974) advanced the proposition that effective leaders have the ability to influence and inspire others to voluntarily increase their level of effort to the organization. This is accomplished, according to House and Mitchell, through the leader's unique focus toward satisfying the needs of their associates first; by providing

the necessary coaching, guidance, support and rewards required to stimulate or engage others toward higher and higher levels of performance.

The Secret to Measuring Leadership Success is by Measuring the Followers

According to Bruce Avolio from the University of Nebraska, the majority of leadership research in the past has considered the follower a passive or nonexistent element (Avolio, 2007). By reversing the tables and studying the success of followers, we see a means for uncovering a powerful method for identifying leadership ability. We find followers scoring high in achievement orientation, self-esteem, and risk-taking were more likely to be drawn to transformational leaders. Here at the [Institute of Heart-Centered Leadership](#), we teach the core principles and virtues of transformational leadership....the Heart-Centered Leader!

Transformational leaders offer a purpose that transcends task assignments and short-term goals, focusing on higher order intrinsic needs. This results in followers identifying with the needs of the leader. Experiments on transformational leadership have demonstrated that it increases employee satisfaction (e.g., Hater & Bass, 1988; Koh, Steers, & Terborg, 1995).

Other research has shown the degree of transformational leadership skills in supervisors are linked to an increase in organizational commitment (Bycio, Hackett, & Allen, 1995; Koh et al., 1995), organizational citizenship behavior (Koh et al., 1995), and increased work performance (Bass, 1985; Howell & Avolio, 1993).

Researchers Barling, Weber, & Kelloway (1996) conducted a study of bank managers. An experimental group received formal training in transformational leadership. This training started with having participants assess the best and worst leaders they had ever encountered during their career. Key concepts of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership were studied. A secondary segment consisted of a workshop to help participants apply the concepts to their own work situations. Lastly, participants received one-on-one follow-up coaching and to debrief the results of a management assessment. The pre-post results based on employee ratings of the leaders performance in key areas reveals that transformation leadership skills can be learned:

Table 1. Transformational Leadership Ratings by Associates.

Variable	Pretest Scores	
	Training Group	Control Group
1. Intellectual Stimulation	2.45	2.61
2. Individualized Consideration	2.59	2.74
3. Charisma	2.63	2.94
4. Organizational Commitment	5.30	5.59

Variable	Posttest Scores	
	Training Group	Control Group
1. Intellectual Stimulation	2.83	2.62
2. Individualized Consideration	2.82	2.69
3. Charisma	2.80	2.78
4. Organizational Commitment	5.85	5.58

Bank branches with managers who participated in the training treatment reported superior financial outcomes in credit card sales and personal loan sales from the results of those branches in the control group. It is interesting to note that even when overall financial performance drops due to general market forces, the positive impact made by managers trained in transformational leadership skills minimizes the impact.

Table 2. Financial Performance Results: Sales Performance.

Variable	Training Group		Control Group	
	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
	<i>M</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>M</i>
1. Credit Card Sales	1.12	1.07	1.27	0.89
2. Personal Loan Sales	0.52	0.72	.054	0.49

Heart-Centered Leadership Training

Heart-Centered Leadership takes traditional transformation leadership training to a brand new level. Much like the research technique Dr. Avolio referred to, the means for defining the success of a leader is by focusing on the measurable success and satisfaction of followers. Measuring the level of inherited traits, while certainly helpful, can only take your organization so far. The vast majority of leadership skill must be learned. We at the [Institute of Heart-Centered Leadership](http://www.instituteofhcl.com) would like to be a partner in helping your organization develop your leaders.

References

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About the Author

Robert Schaefer, vice president of Client Services at Steinbrecher And Associates, Inc., has more than 14 years of experience helping companies align learning solutions with critical company strategies that achieve desired business results. His experience in both the design and implementation facets of training management adds significant benefits to clients in the areas of needs analysis, efficiency modeling, learning retention, statistical analysis, and capture of the return on investment (ROI) of a learning program. One of Robert's specialties in training systems design is the ability to deliver a customized, affordable, and cutting-edge solution that matches the client's unique culture to the specific learning needs.

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