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# ASSESSING LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL

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Finding good leaders is a major challenge for groups, organizations, and countries. Recent research suggests that this challenge is not being fully met. For example, public opinion surveys indicate increasing suspicion of political institutions and elected officials. Leaders may be chosen simply because they have a look of confidence or success, but once on the job, they may lack the intellectual capacity or the “thick skin” required to function successfully as leaders.

## Personality Factors in Leadership

Are you a born leader? One of the first approaches used in studying leadership focused on this type of question. Researchers initially assumed that there are born leaders and born followers and that the focus of research should be on the type of personality characteristics separating leaders from followers. Since this approach does have some value, it will be

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helpful to discuss two personality scales which can be used for such an analysis: the internal/external locus of control scale, and the social responsibility scale.

**The Internal/External Locus of Control Scale.** Key functions of leadership include goal-setting and decision-making. These functions imply that a leader must believe in his or her ability to affect the behavior of others. This belief can be assessed by measuring a person’s “locus of control.” A person who feels in control or places the locus of control internally, is called an **internal**. **Externals** see the locus of control to be outside themselves. That is, they see events to be controlled by other people or even “the fates” (Lambith, 1980: 167-168).

Researchers in social psychology have shown that **internals** are “take charge” people. They are not afraid of risks. Presumably, such people may be more effective than **externals** in leadership positions.

Figure 1 — Item Statements for Internal/External Locus of Control Scale (with preferred score)

1 Strongly Agree	2 Agree	3 Undecided	4 Disagree	5 Strongly Disagree
				(1)
				(5)
				(1)
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How do you discover if someone is an **internal** or an **external**? It may be possible to begin this assessment simply through listening and observation. In informal discussions, one can listen to **how** someone describes a problem or a situation. If a person consistently attributes the cause of his or her problems to others, or to bad luck, the orientation of that person is **external**. If a person attributes the causes of problems to himself and his/her lack of action, he or she is probably in **internal**. However, there are many personality scales that more systematically measure the internal/external locus of control. One such scale is provided in Figure 1.

The I/E scale was designed to find how people orient themselves to causes of events outside themselves, such as luck or other situational factors. The scale tries to discriminate among people on the basis of how much they see themselves in charge of their own fates. People who are in control of their fates are said to have an **internal** locus of control.

To measure how much internal or external locus of control a person has, the 17-item scale was developed. Individuals report their reactions to the items in terms of agreement or disagreement. The "1" and "5" in the parentheses are the preferred responses for a person with an internal locus of control. Many of these statements deal with hard work, planning and self control, characteristics one would expect a person with good control over his or her life to possess. Also items on the scale deal with luck, fate, or the absence of self-control. A person who has an internal locus of control would be expected to disagree with these items.

On this compact scale, the scoring is done in terms of how far from the preferred score the individual's responses are. For example, for the first statement, someone may disagree with the item. But the preferred response is that one strongly agrees with the response. To total the scores, one need only add the points away from the preferred scores for all 17 statements to get a score for the individual on his or her locus of control.

How accurate is this scale? A group of 4-H leaders in North Dakota recently took this set of statements. Upon scoring the statements the respondents were very close to the preferred score except for items 11 and 17. Both these items deal with belief in luck. Generally these individuals were high on internal locus of control and were thus good leadership material.

**The Social Responsibility Scale.** If a person does feel in control of situations, does he or she exercise that control with a sense of social responsibility? A socially responsible leader would be one who is concerned about the well-being of the followers and society in general. A sense of social responsibility is linked to one's sense of altruism and to one's sense of commitment to others.

A very informal assessment of a leader's social responsibility can involve simply listening to someone discussing problems or situations. The listener can note how the leader defines his/her action and how he or she describes how others have responded to situations. If the person emphasizes duty and commitment to people and to projects, the person may rank high on social responsibility. However, a person's level of social responsibility can be more systematically determined with the Social Responsibility Scale devised by Lawrence Berkowitz and Ken Lutterman from the University of Wisconsin. This scale includes ideas about one's sense of duty and obligation with eight general statements for respondents to evaluate (Figure 2). The responses indicating a high sense of social responsibility are starred in the figure.

How can this scale be used to assess leadership potential? By filling in the scale, the reader can assess his or her own attitudes toward leadership, social responsibility and commitment. A preferred response is given a value of "5", the next preferred response is given a "4" and so on to the least preferred response. Presumably, the higher the total score, the greater is one's level of social responsibility.

The scale appears to be a useful predictor of some leadership behaviors. The authors reported that those who scored high on the scale were more likely to:

1. Make financial contributions to educational and religious institutions.
2. Be active in community organizations and church work.
3. Show interest in national and local politics and be politically active.
4. Vote in elections and know the names of candidates for office. (Robison and Shaver, 1973).

This scale has been used for 4-H/CRD youth volunteer leaders in North Dakota. The results show that persons scoring high on the scale are more likely than low scorers to be active in other youth recreation activities. Thus, this scale may be a useful predictor of leadership behavior in these types of programs.

In sum, the internal/external locus of control scale and the social responsibility scale illustrate the types of scales often used in efforts to measure leadership potential. In particular, research on leadership personality has provided some of the following findings: leaders tend to be more intelligent, more enthusiastic, and more self-confident than followers. However, the one characteristic that has been shown to be perhaps the best single predictor of leadership is mere talkativeness.

Figure 2 — Social Responsibility Scale

1. It is no use worrying about current events or public affairs; I can't do anything about them anyway.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	*Disagree	*Strongly Disagree
2. Every person should give some time for the good of his/her town or country.	*Strongly Agree	*Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
3. Our country would be a lot better off if we didn't have so many elections and people didn't have to vote so often.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	*Disagree	*Strongly Disagree
4. Letting your friends down is not so bad because you can't do good all the time for everybody.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	*Disagree	*Strongly Disagree
5. It is the duty of each person to do his or her job the very best he/she can.	*Strongly Agree	*Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
6. People would be a lot better off if they could live far away from other people and never have to do anything for them.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	*Disagree	*Strongly Disagree
7. At school I usually volunteered for special projects.	*Strongly Agree	*Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
8. I feel very bad when I have failed to finish a job I promised I would do.	*Strongly Agree	*Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

The more talkative a person tends to be (as long as the person is not obnoxious) the more likely it is that the person will be accepted as a leader. Apparently, people expect leaders to do most of the talking and the person who does this gets the nod as leader (Forsyth, 1983).

Beyond this relatively short list of personality characteristics, however, research has been generally unsuccessful in creating a detailed personality profile of the "born leader." Few characteristics consistently distinguish between leaders and followers across situations. As a result, researchers are moving away from the notion that there are born leaders who will be automatically successful in any and all leadership positions. Instead, it has been more fruitful to focus **not** just on leadership personality, but also on the nature of the leadership position itself. Research suggests that different types of leadership positions require different types of leadership personalities. The next section will examine how leadership positions differ.

### Leadership Positions

Leadership positions can differ in terms of the type of task that a leader must coordinate and the nature of the people or followers with whom the leader is working. For example, tasks can vary considerably in their degree of clarity. The leader of a work group whose task it is to assemble parts for a

home computer has a much clearer, more well-defined task than does the leader whose task it is to coordinate a creative advertising campaign for a new product. The difference in clarity of these tasks is important because it suggests the need for different types of leadership personalities.

Leaders not only face different tasks, they also have different types of followers. The type of followers may have a significant impact on leadership style. For instance, followers who are generally cooperative and interested in their work may have different expectations about their leader than followers who dislike their task. One person's personality may successfully fit one set of expectations, but find it impossible to successfully fit the other set.

In addition, different expectations may also be generated by cultural beliefs concerning the type of leadership style which leaders **should** develop. This notion is reflected in our society's evaluation of George Washington. As our country's first military leader and president, he had considerable power, yet he chose not to fully exercise it. Our society may view Washington as a great leader partially because his leadership style fit what is considered appropriate for democratic leaders. A recent study by Barry Schwartz notes that Washington was our "heroic leader" because he had personal attributes

his countrymen felt were necessary to mobilize the nation for the strenuous effort to change our country's political and social institutions.

*"Washington's leadership contained no authoritarian elements; he distinguished himself not by the feats he performed to acquire power, but by the length he went to avoid power and the enthusiasm with which he relinquished the power vested in him by his countrymen."* (Schwartz, 1983: 19).

Had Washington used the same leadership style in a society which valued an authoritarian approach, he may have been viewed quite negatively. But George Washington's actions fit the expectations of his countrymen. It is important to understand the nature of leadership positions, both the tasks and the followers involved, in order to fully understand leadership.

### Personality and Position

If leadership positions differ in terms of the types of tasks and followers associated with them, it should be useful to develop scales measuring how leaders differ in the way they handle these aspects of leadership. Ideally, scores for different leaders could then be matched with the demands of different positions.

A variety of scales have been designed to test the relative orientation of individual leaders to the task concerns of a position vs. the human concerns of dealing effectively with followers. One such scale was developed at the University of Minnesota by Dr. Pat Borich and Jim Lewis of the Agricultural Extension Service. Their scale measures how an individual responds to conflict and uses this data to determine the relative emphasis the person places on task vs. follower concerns. Figure 3 illustrates the scale.

We suggest the reader examine the items and indicate his or her reaction to each. The survey was designed to yield five sets of commonly scored statements called factors. To get a score on each factor, simply add by the following system:

- Factor 1: Items 1, 6, 11 and 16. \_\_\_ + \_\_\_ + \_\_\_ + \_\_\_ = \_\_\_
- Factor 2: Items 2, 7, 12 and 17. \_\_\_ + \_\_\_ + \_\_\_ + \_\_\_ = \_\_\_
- Factor 3: Items 3, 8, 13 and 18. \_\_\_ + \_\_\_ + \_\_\_ + \_\_\_ = \_\_\_
- Factor 4: Items 4, 9, 14 and 19. \_\_\_ + \_\_\_ + \_\_\_ + \_\_\_ = \_\_\_
- Factor 5: Items 5, 10, 15 and 20. \_\_\_ + \_\_\_ + \_\_\_ + \_\_\_ = \_\_\_

The reader may find that he or she is high on some factors and low on others. These high and low scores indicate how close the reader is to different styles of conflict management which in turn indicate different orientations to task and follower concerns. In Figure 4, these different orientations are represented along the side and the bottom of the graph. These dimensions help to locate the different

**Figure 3 — Leader Conflict Management Scale**

Most people have seen folk sayings that refer to ways to resolve conflict. These folk sayings reflect traditional wisdom. Look at each statement and tell us how typical it is for your actions in a conflict situation. Please use the number on the scale below and put the number on the left.

- 5 = Very typical of the way I act in a conflict.
- 4 = Frequently typical of the way I act in a conflict.
- 3 = Sometimes typical of the way I act in a conflict.
- 2 = Seldom typical of the way I act in a conflict.
- 1 = Never typical of the way I act in a conflict.

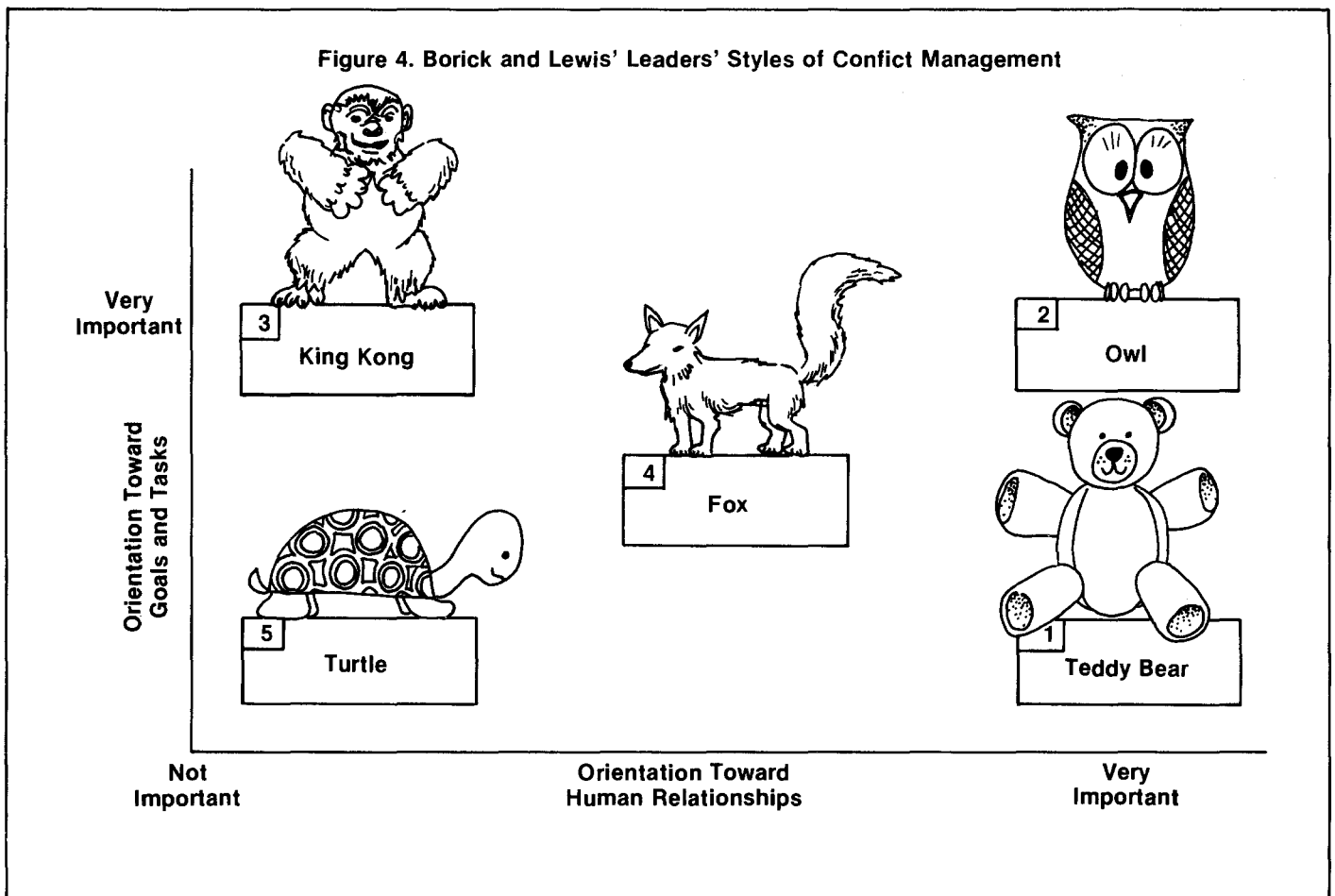
### Folk Wisdom Sayings

- \_\_\_1. Soft words win hard hearts.
- \_\_\_2. Come now and let us reason together.
- \_\_\_3. The arguments of the strongest always have the most weight.
- \_\_\_4. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours.
- \_\_\_5. The best way of handling conflicts is to avoid them.
- \_\_\_6. When one hits you with a stone, hit him with a piece of cotton.
- \_\_\_7. A question must be decided by knowledge and not by numbers if it is to have a right decision.
- \_\_\_8. If you cannot make a person think as you do, make him do as you think.
- \_\_\_9. Better half a loaf than no bread at all.
- \_\_\_10. If someone is ready to quarrel with you, he or she isn't worth knowing.
- \_\_\_11. Smooth words make smooth ways.
- \_\_\_12. By digging and digging, the truth is discovered.
- \_\_\_13. He who fights and runs away lives to run another day.
- \_\_\_14. A fair exchange brings no quarrel.
- \_\_\_15. There is nothing so important that you have to fight for it.
- \_\_\_16. Kill your enemies with kindness.
- \_\_\_17. Seek till you find, and you'll not lose your labor.
- \_\_\_18. Might overcomes right.
- \_\_\_19. Tit for tat is fair play.
- \_\_\_20. Avoid quarrelsome people — they will only make your life miserable.

styles of conflict management as indicated in the boxes on the graph.

Those who are highest on Factor 1 are called "Teddy Bears." For them the tasks and goals are not important; people relationships are very important. Factor 2 people, "Owls," try to be interested in both goals/tasks and people. So the "Owl" and the "Teddy Bear" both share a concern for people relation-

Figure 4. Borick and Lewis' Leaders' Styles of Conflict Management



ships, but the "Owl" tries to balance this concern with a concern for the goals or tasks of the group.

Those who score highest on Factor 3 are called "King Kongs" (or "Queen Kongs"). For them, human relationships are irrelevant and unimportant. They will sacrifice all for the goals of the organization or the completion of tasks. Factor 5 people, "Turtles," are withdrawn, not concerned with either tasks or with people. On Factor 4, those who have scored highest are called "Foxes." The "Fox" is a clever, keen-eyed manager who can juggle tasks and people into relationships that are good for goal attainment as well as beneficial for the people.

Some management researchers contend that the "Fox" is the preferred type in any leadership position because he or she can be on a constant search to match people to goals. However, this type of person appears to be relatively rare. Furthermore, there may be situations where other combinations of concerns may be more effective. For instance, a person with low relationship concerns but high task concerns may be most effective when a group is relatively new and unaccustomed to its task. As the group becomes more "mature," there may be a greater need for a leader with both high relationship and high task concerns until the group members become

relatively self-sufficient at which time a leader with relatively low task and relationship concerns may work best. Research is still being done to test these notions (Forsyth, 1983).

### Practical Implications

This review of research on leadership has emphasized two points with important practical implications. First, there do appear to be a limited number of personality characteristics that leaders should have in most situations. Second, moving beyond this limited list, every effort should be made to match specific personality characteristics with the specific demands of different leadership positions. The practical implications of each point will be explored.

First, the fact that there do appear to be some generally useful personality characteristics for all leaders can be helpful both in **training** potential leaders and in **selecting** candidates as leaders. In leadership training, research suggests the need to encourage talkativeness, support self-confidence, stimulate enthusiasm and encourage potential leaders to become better informed or "intelligent" in matters of concern to followers. Future research may also support the importance of the

characteristics measured by our sample personality scales, i.e., locus of control and social responsibility. To the extent that potential leaders develop these general personality characteristics through leadership training, they should improve their own leadership potential.

An awareness of these characteristics can also be useful in selecting leaders. For example, the list can serve as a checklist of generally desired personality characteristics. A candidate's possession of any one of these characteristics by itself may not be that helpful, but candidates high on all the characteristics (e.g., talkativeness, intelligence, self-confidence and enthusiasm) should probably be preferred for leadership positions. In sum, concern with this general list of personality characteristics should improve both leadership training and leadership selection.

However, this is only part of the story. An over-emphasis on personality characteristics will short-change leadership training and leadership selection efforts. As noted earlier, there must also be a focus on the fit between personality and position. Perhaps an analogy will help to further illustrate this point. All cars need a steering mechanism, brake system, etc., just as most leaders need certain generally important personality characteristics. However, the basic mechanical systems of a car must be modified or fine tuned to meet the specific demands of different driving conditions — city driving vs. racing, desert driving vs. winter driving, and so forth. Similarly, fine tuning is also needed to efficiently fit personality with position.

This point is important to both the leadership training and leadership selection processes. Beginning with leadership training, three suggestions can be made. First, potential leaders should learn how to analyze leadership positions. Are the tasks associated with the position clear or fuzzy? What specific expectations do followers have for a leader in the position? Future leaders should learn to automatically ask these questions when approaching a position of leadership.

Second potential leaders also need to learn how to examine their own personalities in terms of the leadership position. Does the potential leader have a personality that is very task-oriented, very person-oriented or some combination of these orientations? Scales such as the conflict management scale offered earlier can help to measure these orientations. When this knowledge is combined with knowledge about general personality characteristics like self-confidence and enthusiasm, the potential leader should gain the self-awareness necessary to effectively estimate his or her leadership potential for different positions.

Finally, training programs should also discuss the possibility of modifying positions to fit personalities. For example, how can fuzzy tasks be

redefined in a clearer manner? How can followers' expectations be molded to fit a leader's style? In sum, a focus on both personality and position raises a variety of new concerns for leadership training.

This focus can also improve leadership selection. The focus on personality and position suggests the need to go beyond the general checklist of personality characteristics offered earlier. The candidate also must be examined in terms of how his or her specific pattern of personality characteristics meets the specific demands of the position. This means that the demands of the position itself must be understood by the persons selecting candidates as leaders. Simply selecting a candidate in terms of his or her personality without considering how that personality fits the specific demands of the position could lead to frustration and dissatisfaction.

Furthermore, concern with the fit between personality and position can help avoid two other errors in the leadership selection process. First, a candidate should not be automatically rejected if he or she has a record of a past failure in some other leadership position. Similarly, a person should not be automatically accepted if he or she has a record of success in some other leadership position. Instead, the nature of the previous position should be carefully examined and compared to the current position. If the past and current positions are **similar**, then a record of past success or failure **should** be relevant. However, if the past and current positions have very **different** sets of demands, then perhaps **less** emphasis should be placed on past success or failure. These suggestions may make the leadership selection process somewhat more complex, but they should also improve its efficiency.

## Conclusion

Studies of leadership point to two important insights. First, there are a limited number of generally useful personality characteristics for all leaders to possess. Second, beyond this list, every effort should be made to match specific characteristics with the specific demands of different leadership positions. It was shown that both insights have important practical implications for leadership training and leadership selection. Hopefully, future research will provide even more specific advice in the application of these general insights.

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