Name
Date

Leadership

Five Insights from Leadership Research

1. We need to set our sights higher.

2. We need to stop emphasizing weaknesses.

3. We need to invest more in identifying and developing strengths.

4. We need to ensure that leadership has the structure necessary to support the organization.

5. We need to understand that developing strengths often requires a nonlinear approach.

Do you have leadership qualities?

What are your strengths / weaknesses?

How often do you blame others for problems?

Have you ever read a book about leadership?

Have you ever read an article about leadership?

Have you ever joined a speech about leadership?

How to go about correcting a weakness?

How would you build on strength?

What traits or behaviors that others actively see in you make a positive impact on how the organization functions?

What's leadership?

Can leadership be developed?

What methods are used to develop leadership?

Five Insights from Leadership Research

Ongoing analysis of 200,000 360-degree feedback reports yields some unexpected findings on the making of organizational leaders. Among them: We're too focused on erasing leaders' weaknesses when we should be teaching them to develop their strengths.

Let's face it: Leadership development has been stuck for a long time. The most fundamental questions are still in dispute. For example: What is this thing we call leadership? Is it genetically hardwired[1] into some people but not others? Can it be developed? And if so, what methods really work?

Ironically, these questions persist in the midst of a veritable mountain of printed material. Every bookstore contains dozens—if not hundreds—of books on the subject, many written by scholars for prominent business, military and governmental leaders. Tens of thousands of articles are available, and the number of speeches on the subject is way beyond counting.

Despite all these resources, the study of leadership begs for a more scientific approach. Imagine where medicine, engineering, physics, space exploration, chemistry or aviation mechanics would be if these disciplines had relied on the opinions and personal views of leading practitioners, devoid[2] of research and published results.

[1] [Hardwired] Refers to fixed placement; for example, text and graphics that never change their location on a page. A "hardwired banner" is a banner ad that is not dynamically rotated with different pageviews.
[2] [devoid] Completely lacking; destitute or empty.

Notes

Success in understanding any complex field requires that researchers apply scientific rigor and then share their findings. For the past five years, one of the authors of this article, Joseph Folkman, has led a team that has been analyzing a substantial database of approximately 200,000 feedback instruments—commonly called 360-degree feedback reports—that pertained to approximately 20,000 managers. These questionnaires were collected within hundreds of companies.

The results of this research are published in a book co-authored by Folkman and Jack Zenger, The Extraordinary Leader: How Good Managers Become Great Leaders. Our research has continued, and additional findings are being published by the authors through the Zenger Folkman consulting organization.

Our data-driven approach to understanding leadership has led to a number of unexpected insights. This article will share five of our fundamental findings. Our hope is that this will lead to additional questions, debates and research—all of which will further our understanding of leaders and how they develop.

1. We need to set our sights higher.

Earlier in his career, one of the authors co-founded a highly successful supervisory skills training firm. The firm's underlying objective was to teach frontline managers the basics—and because so many supervisors lacked these fundamentals, merely getting them to the point of adequacy turned out to be a worthwhile (and profitable) achievement. Teaching them how to be among the best managers in their respective companies was never considered.

In hindsight, the skills provided stopped way short of the ultimate target: to produce extraordinary leaders who, in turn, produce extraordinary results for the company. Many of today's organizations fall into a similar trap. They focus on under-performers with the intent to bring them up to an adequate level. Or, conversely, they invest heavily in their high-potential managers and provide few developmental resources for everyone else. Our research indicates that neither approach is optimal. Organizations will reap[3] huge benefits by helping the vast pool of good managers learn how to become great.

In short, we've been putting our leadership development emphasis on the wrong populations. Rather than focus on the top end or the bottom end, our efforts should be directed to the large group in the middle. Building these good leaders' capability to behave like top-tier leaders can produce results that are far beyond incremental.

[3] [reap] To obtain a return or reward. To cut (grain or pulse) for harvest with a scythe, sickle, or reaper. harvest (a crop).

2. **We need to stop emphasizing weaknesses.**

Notes

Future leaders learn at a young age that the way to improve themselves is to fix their weaknesses. By the time they start their careers and receive their first supervisory assignment, the habit is deeply ingrained. They ignore their strong points in favor of an in-depth analysis of their shortcomings. They have developed a bone-deep belief that if they raise those lower scores, they will be better leaders.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. In our research, "lack of weaknesses" was not the distinguishing feature of the best leaders. Instead, they possessed a few profound strengths. They used these strengths to great advantage in the organization—and, in turn, were known for being world class in two or three areas.

A caveat is in order here. Our research identified one situation in which working on weaknesses is the right thing: when the leader has what could be termed a "fatal flaw." All leaders have some areas where they're not so strong. Such rough edges aren't a problem if the leader has outstanding strengths that compensate. But if the shortcomings are so serious that they prevent a leader from seeing his or her strengths, they become a brick wall of sorts. The leader cannot move forward until this wall is torn down.

As we analyzed the least effective leaders in our database, we found the following list of typical fatal flaws[4]:

- Inability to learn from mistakes
- Interpersonal incompetence
- Lack of openness to new ideas
- Tendency to blame others for problems
- Lack of initiative

Playing it safe is perhaps the most risky thing a leader can do. Better to get out and make something happen than be perceived as a conservative, careful non-contributor.

Caveat

warning,
caution,
admonition,
forewarning,
qualification,
stipulation,
requirement,
limitation,
explanation

[4] [flaws] An imperfection, often concealed, that impairs soundness.

3. **We need to invest more in identifying and developing strengths.**

Notes

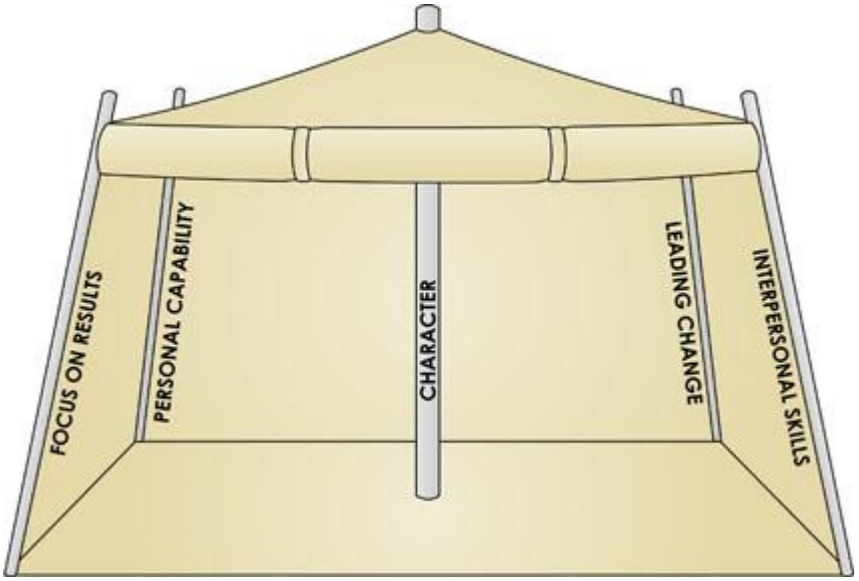
Being an extraordinary leader doesn't mean doing 34 things reasonably well; it means doing three or four things extremely well. The implications are revolutionary. When a leader develops three or four competencies to a certain level of proficiency, then this person will join that elite group. These strengths cannot be just any behaviors. The strengths must be in areas that make a difference. They must be traits or behaviors that others readily see, and that make a positive impact on how the organization functions. We have identified these as "differentiating competencies." We discovered that there were 16 such differentiating behaviors. The leader would be advised to work on competencies from this list.

List three or four things you do *extremely* well

Notes

4. **We need to ensure that leadership has the structure necessary to support the organization.**

One of our objectives in reporting this research was to make it simple and actionable, along with being empirical. Think of a traditional wall tent, with a center pole and four corner poles holding up an expanse of canvas. The amount of space inside the tent is symbolic of the effectiveness of a leader. As mentioned above, our empirical research showed 16 differentiating competencies clustered into five areas. The research can be illustrated by this tent.



The center pole represents the cluster[5][5] of leadership traits having to do with character, honesty and integrity. We believe this is at the core of all effective leadership.

In one corner, the pole represents personal capabilities: technical competence, problem-solving skills, innovation and self-development. These are skills that should be acquired early in one's career, prior to accepting a supervisory position.

In the second corner pole is a cluster of competencies about the leader's focus on results, including setting high goals that stretch the team, and accepting responsibility for the performance of the work group.

A third corner pole represents effective interpersonal skills. These include being a powerful and prolific[6][6] communicator, motivating and inspiring others, and collaborating with other people and groups. Some organizations tolerate interpersonally impaired leaders in the short run, but few put up with it for long.

The final corner pole represents leading change. This cluster includes being a champion for constant change, being the link to the outside world, and looking over the horizon for what is coming up. Here are the 16 capabilities grouped into the five "poles."

[5] [Cluster] A group

[6] [Prolific] Producing a constant creative output abundant works or results

Focus on Results	Leading Change	Character	Interpersonal Skills	Personal Capability
Drives for Results Establishes Stretch Goals Takes Initiative	Develops Strategic Perspectives Champions Change Connects the Group to the Outside World	Displays Integrity and Honesty	Communicates Powerfully and Prolifically Inspires and Motivates Other to High Performance Builds Relationships Develops Other Collaboration and Teamwork	Technical Professional Expertise Solves Problems and Analyzes Issues Innovates Practices Self-Development

5. **We need to understand that developing strengths often requires a nonlinear approach.**

Ask anyone how to go about correcting a weakness, and they will give you the standard answer: Study, practice, get feedback, repeat. Ask the same person, "OK, how would you build on a strength?" and you'll often be met by a blank stare. We've been conditioned to look for and fix defects. Few of us have ever seriously considered the question "How do I get better at something I'm already pretty good at?"

For this reason, some leadership theorists argue that building strengths is a fool's errand [7]. We would state it differently: When a person begins to excel in an area, a different approach to development is required.

In delving[8] into the empirical data, we discovered a fascinating and previously unnoticed phenomenon: A number of supporting behaviors were statistically correlated with each of the 16 differentiating leadership competencies. We have called these supporting behaviors "competency companions," or "*behavioral buddies.*"

Examples abound in the world of athletics. Why do world-class tennis players lift weights and run long distances? Why do runners also swim and bicycle? Such cross-training has become commonplace as athletes have discovered it greatly improves their performance. The competency companions represent the cross-training manual for leaders who are intent on building on their strengths.

For example: An oil company executive wanted to move his relationship-building skills from good to great. In working with a coach, he stated his goal as "I am going to be nicer!"

The coach asked what that meant and the executive said, *"Well, you know, just in general, I'm going to be friendly, not pushy."* Faced with this well-intentioned but vague reply, the coach discussed with him the seven competency companions associated with relationship building and asked if any of the companion skills jumped out at him as ways to improve his effectiveness in relationship building.

After a bit of reflection, the executive responded, "*Optimism—it hits me right between the eyes. I've always prided myself on my ability to find the flaw in any argument, or a potential problem that no one else noticed. That's a very helpful trait when you're running an oil refinery. But I can see how it undermines my relationships with others. I never saw the connection in the past, but I realize that people may not like to have a discussion with someone who's always telling them why their ideas won't work.*"

That the differentiating competencies and their companion behaviors are statistically linked is obvious from the data. The reason for the connection is less obvious. Does A cause B, or does B cause A? Or, do they simply have another common root? We hope the answer to those questions will come as we conduct further research. For now, we can say with total confidence that, for example, assertiveness is a powerful companion behavior to honesty and integrity, or that networking greatly leverages a person's strength in technical expertise.

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[7] [Errand] , task, duty, chore, job, mission

[8] [delving] To search deeply and laboriously. To dig the ground, as with a spade.

More work to do

Notes

The Extraordinary Leader research provides new insights into the nature of leadership and leadership development. Like most research, it pushes out the perimeter of the circle of knowledge. Just beyond the circle, however, is the expanse of unanswered questions. Our hope is that many more students of leadership will approach this extremely important topic with scientific rigor.

Only in this way will we be able to answer the bigger questions raised at the beginning of this article. We are convinced that, to a great degree, leaders can be made. Genetic makeup is not the main determinant of great leadership. Certainly, some people are born with a high energy level, keen intellect and emotional hardiness. These are helpful traits, but they fail to explain the late-blooming leader. They also fail to explain the promising youth who gets derailed and never recovers.

We acknowledge that much of leadership development happens casually and informally as people work. But we are not dissuaded from believing that intense bursts of development can have a powerful effect in creating a new mind-set and new skills. Just as formal classroom development can greatly accelerate the progress of newly minted supervisors, good science will continue to be of enormous help in our quest to develop extraordinary leaders.

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Joseph Folkman, Ph.D., is a frequent keynote speaker and conference presenter, a consultant to some of the world's most successful organizations and the author or co-author of six books. His research has been published in The Wall Street Journal's National Business Employment Weekly, Training and Development, and Executive Excellence.

Kurt Sandholtz is a facilitator, writer and training designer who has designed and delivered hundreds of seminars on leadership development, coaching skills, change management and career planning. He holds a master's degree in organizational behavior from the Marriott School of Management at Brigham Young University, where he has been a visiting professor. He has written numerous articles and was the lead author of Beyond Juggling: Rebalancing Your Busy Life.

Workforce Management, July 2009 –

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