Personality Theories of Leadership

Are you born to be a leader? Are you a "natural"? Or is leadership a set of behaviors and competencies that anyone can develop, given the right experiences, circumstances, and training? The answers to these questions have been debated for centuries. Here, we focus on theories of leadership that would answer with a resounding yes to the first two questions, emphasizing that leadership is deeply embedded within our personalities or in the traits with which we were born. This entry defines and reviews *personality-* and *trait-based theories of leadership* before turning to critiques of these approaches.

Personality- and trait-based approaches to leadership argue that certain individuals have innate characteristics that make them ideally suited for leadership, and these traits or characteristics are what differentiate these leaders from everyone else. Early approaches in this genre included the *great man theories*, which were based on the assumption that the capacity for leadership is inherent—that great leaders are born, not made or developed. These theories often portrayed great leaders as heroic, mythical, and uniquely destined to rise to leadership when their skills were needed. The term *great man* reflects an assumption of these early theories that leadership was a predominantly male quality, especially in the domains of political and military leadership.

One of the first systematic attempts to understand leadership in the 20th century, the great man theory evolved into personality- or trait-based approaches as more modern research revealed that leadership was not inherently male dominated and that leadership could be found and studied in more common settings rather than at the highest levels of organizations or nations. More than a century of research has been conducted on the traits that have been associated to a greater or lesser degree with leadership, and some traits have received consistent support while others have emerged in some studies but not in others. An overview of research on the *Big Five personality factors* and the degree to which each has been linked to leadership is followed by a summary of the five more-specific traits that have been most consistently connected to leadership.

Leadership and the Big Five

Since the 1960s, researchers have examined whether there is a relationship between the basic agreed-on factors that make up personality and leadership. The Big Five personality factors are conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, openness, and extraversion, which some researchers have labeled the *CANOE* personality model as an easy aid to remembering each factor.

Conscientiousness is defined as an individual's tendency to be organized, thorough, controlled, decisive, and dependable. Of the Big Five factors, it is the personality factor that has been related to leadership second most strongly (after extraversion) in previous research. *Agreeableness*, or an individual's tendency to be trusting, nurturing,

conforming, and accepting, has been only weakly associated with leadership. *Neuroticism*, or the tendency to be anxious, hostile, depressed, vulnerable, and insecure, has been moderately and negatively related to leadership, suggesting that most leaders tend to be low in neuroticism. *Openness*, sometimes referred to as openness to experience, refers to an individual's tendency to be curious, creative, insightful, and informed. Openness has been moderately related to leadership, suggesting that leaders tend to be somewhat higher in openness than nonleaders. Finally, *extraversion* is the personality factor that has been most strongly associated with leadership. Defined as the tendency to be sociable (discussed in greater detail below), assertive, and have positive energy, extraversion has been described as the most important personality trait of effective leaders.

Although research on the Big Five personality factors has found some relationships between these overall personality factors and leadership, focusing on more specific traits has led to more consistent findings between effective leadership and the following five traits: intelligence, self-confidence, determination, sociability, and integrity.

Specific Traits Associated With Leadership

Intelligence

A great deal of research suggests that leaders have above-average intelligence. Intellectual ability has been positively associated with cognitive reasoning skills, the capacity to articulate ideas and thoughts to others, and the perceptual ability to recognize important situational factors. Research has focused on the link between intelligence and a leader's development of good problem-solving skills, the ability to adequately assess social situations, and the ability to understand complex organizational issues. Although intelligence has consistently been shown, in a wide variety of studies, to relate positively to leadership, other research has pointed out that it is important that the leader's intellectual ability is not too dissimilar from that of his or her followers. If leaders far surpass their followers in intelligence, they may be unable to express ideas and issues in ways that appeal to or connect with their followers.

Self-Confidence

Additional research has pointed to a consistent relationship between a leader's effectiveness, on one hand, and confidence in his or her skills, technical competencies, and ideas, on the other. Having high self-esteem, a positive regard for one's own ability to lead, and assurance that one's vision or purpose is the right one all help a leader influence others. While some studies have examined self-confidence and others have focused on confidence more generally, it is clear that feeling and communicating certainty about one's own abilities as a leader is a common leadership trait.

Determination or Perseverance

Leadership is often a difficult, thankless, long, and arduous process. Perhaps as a result of this fact, a great deal of research has suggested that leaders must be determined to complete a task or get a job done, even in the face of adversity or when there is less than overwhelming support from others. Leaders show initiative and drive and frequently constitute the motivational energy behind a project or social change movement. Thus, the ability to assert oneself when necessary, be proactive, and continue to push on in the face of obstacles is a key component of leadership. In addition, this determination often involves displaying dominance and a drive to succeed even in the face of initial failures.

Sociability

Sociability is defined as a leader's desire for high-quality social relationships and the ability to maintain and restore positive relationships in difficult times that often involve adversity and crisis. Across studies, leaders often demonstrate the ability to be friendly, extraverted (outgoing), courteous, tactful, and diplomatic. In addition, leaders tend to be sensitive to the needs of others, even at the cost of attending to their own needs. In short, leaders care about the interests of others and put others' interests before their own. Leaders have good interpersonal skills that communicate their concern for others, and they work to smooth out conflicts and disagreements to maintain the group's social harmony.

Integrity

None of the previous traits addresses the fact that smart, confident, determined, and sociable leaders can also be fundamentally immoral and corrupt. The fifth factor, integrity, addresses the finding that leaders tend to be honest and trustworthy, inspiring others to respect them and trust them with important decisions and resources. Leaders are often variously described as loyal, responsible, dependable, and honest. These characteristics inspire the confidence of others and provide evidence that leaders are authentic and have the best interests of the group at heart. This is in stark opposition to individuals who use the efforts and resources of the group for their own prosperity or power and manipulate the group's time and money for their own personal gain (e.g., cult leaders Jim Jones and David Koresh).

Leadership and Emotional Intelligence

In the early 1990s, the concept of emotional intelligence was introduced by Daniel Goleman and others, and it has captured a great deal of attention from practicing leaders and from organizations seeking to enhance the leadership abilities of their employees. Emotional intelligence, abbreviated variously as EQ or EI, is defined as one's ability to perceive and express emotions, understand and reason with emotions, and effectively manage emotions, both in oneself and in others. More recently, a number of assessments have been developed to measure emotional intelligence, and efforts have been made to link emotional intelligence to one's leadership abilities and even one's ultimate successes in life.

There has been considerable debate, however, as to whether emotional intelligence represents a unique construct that is sufficiently different from the five key traits and Big Five personality factors described above. Despite this debate, it seems likely that people who are sensitive to both their own emotions and the emotions of others, and who are adept at managing emotions and accurately discerning their impact, will be more effective leaders.

Critiques of the Trait Approach to Leadership

Similar in many ways to the early great man theories, trait and personality theories assume that people inherit certain qualities and traits that make them suited to be good leaders. By looking at a range of different leaders in a variety of situations over time, trait theorists seek to identify particular personality or behavioral characteristics that leaders share. However, this approach has been criticized for its lack of explanatory power: It is unable to consistently distinguish between leaders and nonleaders. If particular traits are key features of leadership, how do we explain people who possess those qualities but are not leaders? Does an individual need one of these traits, some of them, or all of them to be a good leader? And how do we explain people who have been leaders and exerted widespread influence without possessing some or all of these traits? These questions highlight the difficulties in using trait theories to explain leadership.

Other scholars have pointed out that the recent interest in charismatic leadership essentially represents a neo-personality approach to leadership. Use of the term *charisma* in the popular vernacular focuses primarily on a personalized magnetic appeal that allows leaders to charm and influence others. This approach emphasizes the personal characteristics of the leader to attract and influence others and suggests that charisma is a quality that some leaders can effectively capitalize on to galvanize others into action.

In a similar vein, a prominent critique of the trait or personality approach to leadership is that it discourages individuals from believing they have the "right stuff" to become effective leaders. Approaching leadership as a relationship between leaders and followers or as a set of behaviors and competencies that anyone can develop provides a much more optimistic, democratic, and inclusive picture of leadership. These latter approaches emphasize that given the right experiences, circumstances, and training, each of us has both the capacity and the ability to enact effective leadership, regardless of the specific traits and personality characteristics with which we were born.

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See also Charismatic Leadership; Contingency Theories of Leadership; Great Person Theory of Leadership; Interactionist Theories of Leadership; Leader-Member (LMX) Theory; Leadership; Path–Goal Theory of Leadership; Power; Social Identity Theory of

Leadership; Transactional Leadership Theories; Transformational Leadership Theories; Vertical Dyad Linkage Model

Further Readings

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