Personality

To the manner born

Personality has returned to the forefront of management and leadership, exploding the myth that social engineering and investment alone can create great leaders. But the personality strengths that make leaders great can also be their downfall

by **Nigel Nicholson**

Many people cling to the appealing myth that social engineering and intensive investment alone can create outstanding leaders. If this is true, then why are we forced to put up with so many boring, incompetent and narcissistic bosses? Why do family business owners so frequently struggle to groom their offspring for leadership succession? The answer is that while we can equip people with skills and ways of behaving, it is more difficult to engineer their motives and interests. In other words, we can show these horses how to drink, but we can't make them – and in many cases, we can't even lead them to water.

Advances in the science of individual differences have returned personality to the forefront of management and leadership, bringing fresh clarity to the topic of leadership fitness and performance. They point us towards some fundamental issues of human behaviour and institutional life.

Born to lead?

A prior question to this is: are we born to be different? The answer from behaviour genetics and life span development is one with which any parent with more than one child will concur: a resounding yes.

Infants very early on display pronounced differences in temperament, which are largely the product of genes that govern brain chemistry and development. These differences prefigure a range of emerging aptitudes, intellectual

Capabilities and predispositions, including emotionality, shyness, curiosity, orderliness, resilience, sociability, dominance, intelligence, physical abilities, motor skills and musicality.

Parental bonding, childhood experiences, education and social conditioning overlay these biases like flesh on a skeleton. They shape a range of competencies, including social adjustment factors such as a person's self-image and ability to form relationships. By early adulthood, the main features of personality are well established, with only gradual modulations over the subsequent seasons of most adult lives.

What does this imply for leadership? Clearly some qualities are highly relevant to an aptitude for and interest in leading. It suggests that there are three groups among adults.

1
Broad bandwidth leaders. This rather small group includes people whose drive and dominance make them pursue the leading role in most social situations. They like to lead and take responsibility for people and situations. Here we find the main "transfer market" of chief executives, people who typically care less about the type of organisation than the command they can exercise.

2
Narrow bandwidth leaders. This much larger group features people who are not so much driven to lead as willing to do so under the right circumstances. They are common in focused businesses that favour the promotion of one of their own

kind – such as science or arts-based businesses, academia and much of finance. These are the people who often surprise their colleagues by revealing an aptitude for leadership only when they are called to the role.

3
Nonleaders. For this small group, leadership would be a nightmare. They do no want the responsibility and they dislike the kinds of things leaders have to do, especially having to work with and through other people. For many the barriers are emotional – these people do not want the spotlight on them or are vulnerable to stress and pressure. For other nonleaders the obstacle is interest. Their passions are fully absorbed elsewhere and they will not be deflected into leadership.

Note that qualities underlying these types are mainly motivational. Occasionally people are surprised to discover the leadership motive within them, but people usually know what they want. Nonleaders sensibly avoid a role they know would be bad for their mental health – and probably not so good for others' peace of mind.

Research on the personality profiles of leaders has gone in and out of fashion over the years. Now a new consensus has emerged about the "big five factors" of personality which enables the most general indicator of leadership potential to be identified.

Extroversion. This comes top of the list. People who are active, assertive, sociable and energetic tend to be "emergent" leaders – the ones who "naturally" take the lead in social situations.

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Conscientiousness. This is typified by striving for achievement through control and discipline. Individuals with this drive tend to seek situations where they can impose order and experience success.

Openness. Inventive, intelligent and adaptive people are more willing and interested in the opportunities offered by some leadership situations, though extremely creative individuals find leadership unattractive and restrictive.

Emotionality. Self-confidence is an essential leadership quality, but can be undermined by emotional sensitivity. Leadership sits easier with people who are unwavering in their emotions, have high self-esteem and are not easily discouraged.

Agreeableness. This last dimension – denoting tender-mindedness and nurturing impulses – has yielded ambiguous results that tie in with different situational demands. Tender-minded individuals fit better with some national cultures and sectors – such as the Far East, and the helping professions. Caring and nurturing leaders do not do as well in many western businesses.

Fit to lead?

Leadership success is a product of the chemistry between the demands of situations and personality types. Figure 1 (page 5) shows two basic leadership paradigms found in all organisations, On the left side (model one) is the first-among-equals archetype, where one member of a team emerges or is selected as captain. This model is common in sports teams, project groups and business partnerships. It is a low-power model because the managing partner or team captain lacks the authority to direct other members. Here the leadership role is that of the natural psychologist motivating by example, building confidence, engendering team spirit and solving problems with individuals.

The right side of figure 1 (model two) stands in sharp contrast. Here

we find the long-distance leader, not deeply involved with the team but outward facing, making deals alone, generating work, scouting for talent, and securing resources for the team. The leader's contract with the team is to set their objectives and ensure members have what they need to achieve them. This means the team must be mature - close to self-managing - so the leader does not have to keep intervening to sort out their problems.

Which leader where?

These contrasting archetypes correspond to quite different personality types. Model one is congruent with individuals who have warm, egalitarian impulses, a strong interest in people and who are emotionally resilient to their problems. Model two suits dominant and action-oriented individuals who are self-disciplined, exploratory and happy to work alone.

Difficulties often arise when a model one personality is thrust into a model two leadership role - such as when the team captain becomes club manager, or, conversely, when the lone operator is required to lead a tight-knit democratic team. Problems arise also in changing environments, when a model one environment evolves into a model two situation such as a flotation or acquisition that converts the managing partner of a private firm into the divisional boss of a public corporation.

The challenge for individuals is to recognise the shift and adapt their style. Unless they can see the implications and alter their behaviour, they are likely to carry on managing in the way they feel most comfortable. The result is the football manager who cannot stay out of the locker room because he loves to be "one of the lads", or the project team leader who is always out on a mission when her people need her.

There are other models - hybrids of these two, as well as other forms. Figure 2 shows three key leadership roles in the classic corporate

bureaucracy. At the bottom is the hands-on workforce supervisor who keeps the machines running or the customers happy. This leader needs to be conscientious, disciplined, dominant, sociable and stress-resistant - especially the latter, for this position combines high pressure with low power.

At the topmost level of the chart the leader needs many of the attributes of the long-distance leader, plus qualities that will keep him or her in touch with people. This means an ability to bear solitude, but also the capacity for trust, integrity and other social qualities that build strong and healthy cultures.

Between these two levels are numerous middle-management posts Here the challenge is to transmit the mission down the hierarchy, test its applicability and give feedback to policy chiefs in ways that help inform and reform strategy. The middle manager must also ensure that best practice is shared across the vertical divisions of the business.

This makes the middle manager's role one of the most complex and demanding in business, calling for the qualities of a gifted diplomat - high level communication and listening skills, plus the finesse in the political arts of influencing and decision-making to legitimately and effectively reconcile multiple stake-holder interests.

A role for all

There are many other leadership models, including those emerging in new business structures such as networks, hubs and loose-linked satellite models. Each has its own demands, and there are personality profiles that suit them all. And beyond these models lie a host of professional and other roles that involve no leadership responsibilities at all but each of which has a definite person-fit profile.

This is good news for us all. It means there are many ways of being a leader, and that not wanting to be one is also fine, for there are plenty of other important and valued roles to fulfil in business and society. It is

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a matter of finding what works best with one's style and drives. And we can adapt, up to a point, but let us not make too much of perfect "fit". Sometimes, there is a comparative advantage in being a misfit - like an arts business leader with an accountant's sensibilities. But there are costs to this. The gains must be set against the discomforts and possible conflicts the misfit will have to bear.

The main point is to be aware of how your natural style may not work in one set of circumstances, meaning you must either adapt your style or find a situation that suits you better.

And this is where the trouble begins.

Leadership letdown

The pyramid structure of figure 2 can be the cause of the poor leadership we suffer all too often. It forces anyone wanting achievement and status to ascend through its narrowing channels into leadership positions. In most businesses, the specialist professional arrives at a promotional plateau several levels below the top. To go further means becoming a general manager. This results in leadership ranks being overpopulated with people who have little interest in leading others but a lot of interest in power and status.

Selection processes - as much cultural and unintentional as they are explicit and intentional - can also result in poor leadership. Embattled businesses in tough markets promote macho managers. Creative businesses favour high-risk visionaries. The greedy and unethical leaders who made the headlines in 2002 were the product of the reciprocal chemistry between their own personality profiles and their business cultures. The ethos of extreme individualism, competitive ambition and short-term shareholder returns surrendered to the willpower of obsessively competitive individuals.

The dynamic flows both ways -

not only do organisations create leaders, but leaders shape cultures to fit their impulses. They can do this quite rapidly by surrounding themselves with henchmen and systems that embody their style and values. These cycles can be vicious or virtuous, in the worst cases bringing corporate pathology.

This is not a new phenomenon. Political and business despots - such as Al "Chainsaw" Dunlap, the notorious US boss rise meteorically to power until they crash and burn their businesses and themselves. This circular process, incidentally, is the explanation for the persistent absence of women from top positions. The male ethos of many corporate cultures is not only biased against their selection, it also makes leadership and the path they would have to tread to get it unattractive to them.

One could say, therefore, that organisations get the leaders they deserve and vice versa. Yet this would be a harsh judgement, for people do not always realise what they are acquiring with a new leader. What looks attractive at first turns out to have a liability attached a dark side. As the literature on leadership derailment shows, the very factor that attracts someone to leadership can also be that person's Achilles heel.

The single-mindedness that takes someone to the top might turn out to be one part of an obsessive-compulsive make-up. The leader with an ability to stand apart from the crowd is revealed to be cold and poor at team building. Driving ambition treads a thin line alongside naked self-interest, while self-control can translate into authoritarianism, self-confidence into narcissism and creativity into inconsistency.

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Figure 1: Two leadership archetypes

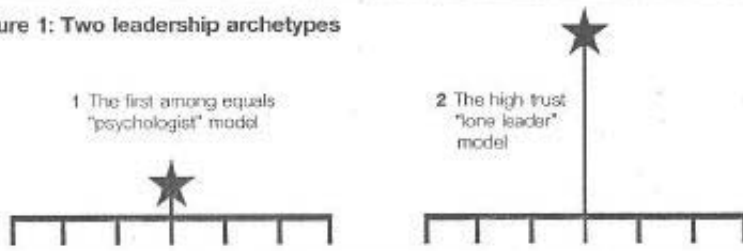1 The first among equals "psychologist" model

2 The high trust "lone leader" model

Figure 2: Corporate hierarchical leadership

1 The integrative visionary leader

2 The embedded political and people leader

3 The frontline fire-fighter and fixer

Identifying hazards

How can we spot these hazards? From a database of around 3,000 executive personality profiles, including many prominent business leaders, I have mapped out three critical themes for examining whether a personality will fit with a specific leadership role.

- **Situational biases.** What are the kinds of leadership situations any given personality type will prefer, such as structured vs informal or creative vs controlled?
- **Relationship preferences.** What kinds of working relationships will they create, such as democratic vs autocratic or close vs distant?
- **Flaws and hotspots.** Which of their impulses, sensitivities and biases could lead them to poor decisions and reactions?

This analysis suggests we can erect three defences to personality crashes in leadership:

1

Leader self-analysis. Leaders can protect themselves against their own personality risks by systematic reflection, using the methods and frameworks outlined here.

2

Top-team diversity. Boards need to guard against executive cloning, to ensure leaders are challenged by people whose biases, drives and styles differ from their own.

3

Organisational culture. The business must espouse values and practices that keep leaders accountable, in touch with their people and open to influence.

Leaders are ordinary people doing the most difficult jobs in our society. We should not expect or ask them to be superhuman or mythic in their powers. Rather, we should create the conditions that help them be themselves - only better.

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