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Cutting-Edge Leadership

PERSONALITY

Will Your Personality Make You a Successful Employee or Leader?

Examining personality traits associated with effective leadership.

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✓ Reviewed by Vanessa Lancaster

KEY POINTS

- The most widely used personality model is the Big Five, which includes openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism.
- Personality traits can be related to effectiveness as an employee or leader, but the relationships are not straightforward.
- Personality isn't destiny. Being aware of one's personality and developing skills to leverage it to your advantage is key.

What part does personality play in predicting a successful leader (or a successful follower/team member)? This is a question that has received a great deal of research.

Let's start with core personality traits. The most widely accepted model for personality traits is the Big Five (or Five-Factor) Model. These core personality traits represent a continuum, and all of us are somewhere on that continuum:

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Conscientiousness (Organized) – Casual (Disorganized)

Agreeableness (Friendly) – Challenging (Callous)

Neuroticism (Sensitive) – Emotionally Stable (Resilient)

Openness to Experience (Curious) – Cautious (Consistent)

Extraversion (Outgoing) – Introversion (Reserved)

[You can use the acronym CANOE to help you remember the Big Five]

Research suggests that these traits are relatively stable across adulthood. However, there may be slight shifts in personality traits depending on major life events, such as a serious illness or trauma.

Let's look at each in turn.

Conscientious individuals tend to be good employees in general because they are systematic and careful in their work. They also pay close attention to detail and feel an obligation to get things done. This also helps in leadership positions because these leaders tend to do detailed analyses of situations and consider alternatives.

On the downside, being overly conscientious might cause leaders to spend too much time analyzing, paralyzing them when quick action is needed.

Agreeableness. Agreeable persons are easy to get along with, but they may get pushed around or easily bullied at work. There doesn't seem to be an overall advantage for leaders to be strongly agreeable. Although followers might like them, highly agreeable leaders may find it hard to reprimand subordinates or get tough when they need to be.

On the other side of the dimension, challenging individuals may be confrontative and stubborn. So, highly agreeable individuals may need to work on being assertive, while challenging persons might need to learn to back off.

Neuroticism. Think of neuroticism as being sensitive and prone to emotionality. As a result, there is good evidence that leaders (and employees in general) do better when they are low on neuroticism and quite emotionally stable and resilient.

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On the other hand, a little bit of neuroticism might cause a leader (or employee) to be motivated by fear of disappointing the team (or the boss).

Openness to Experience. This trait can be positively associated with both leadership and some employees (particularly in organizations that value innovation, such as tech companies and startups). Leaders high on openness tend to bring others into the decision-making process and encourage information sharing and dissenting views. They tend to be risk-takers and more flexible, as well as more creative.

On the other hand, in routine organizations, such as manufacturing or security (e.g., police work, military), more successful leaders may tend to be low on openness because they tend to behave consistently and do things “by the book.”

Extraversion. Extraverts get noticed. Then, it’s no wonder that they stand out and tend to get the job or attain leadership positions. There is also some evidence that extraverted leaders are better performers. However, this extraversion advantage may disappear if the person is overly outgoing and lacks tactful social skills.

On the other hand, introverted leaders may not “stick out” and be seen as leadership material, but they tend to be more thoughtful and self-reflective, which may give them an advantage in complex decision-making. [See more about Extraversion-Introversion and leadership [here](#).]

Does personality matter? Yes, it does, but being a successful employee or leader is more about being aware of your behavioral tendencies (caused, of course, by possession of personality traits) and developing the skills needed to be a success in your job or your leadership position.

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You can get a quick assessment of your Big Five personality profile by going [here](#) or [here](#).

References

Guerin, D.W., Oliver, P.H., Gottfried, A.W., Gottfried, A.E., Reichard, R.J., & Riggio, R.E. (2011). Childhood and adolescent antecedents of social skills and leadership potential in adulthood: Temperamental approach/withdrawal and extraversion. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 22(3), 482-494.