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Cutting-Edge Leadership

LEADERSHIP

Does Personality Predict Leadership?

What early life factors determine adult leadership?

Posted July 1, 2021

✓ Reviewed by Davia Sills

KEY POINTS

- The question of whether leaders are “born” or “made” is often asked, and research has uncovered the answer.
- Leadership is a complex combination of traits and skills, but skills are more important and more malleable.
- Two important keys to effective leadership are strong communication and social skills.

As a leadership scholar who has been researching and teaching about leadership for decades, the most-asked question I get is, “Are leaders born or made?” The answer (similar to the answer to many questions about the nature-nurture issue) is “Both!” There are inborn qualities that predict leadership, but leadership also develops over time.

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Much of the research on innate qualities has focused on personality, so we can indeed address the question of the inborn traits that predict leadership. Using the Big Five model

of leadership, a meta-analysis (a study of studies) tells us that extraversion, emotional stability, and openness to experience are the three traits that are correlated with both attaining a leadership position and being an effective leader.

This makes sense. Extraverted, outgoing individuals are more likely to get noticed and be popular and, as a result, get put in leadership positions. We also want emotionally stable people as leaders, and regarding openness to experience, we want our leaders to be open to our input and to try different strategies in their role as leaders. But what about the “made” elements? Genetic-based research suggests that leadership is about one-third “born” and about two-thirds “made.”

Skills trump traits

Leadership is something that can be developed over time. It involves a wide range of skills, from analysis of information, to decision making, to setting strategy, but foremost among the set of leadership skills is the ability to communicate and establish good relationships with others. So, communication and social skills are crucial for effective leadership. And social skills develop over time and through experience.

In our 40-year study, following participants from 1 year of age into adulthood, we measured Big Five personality at 17 years of age and then assessed leadership at both 29 and 38 years of age. We found, as other researchers have, that extraversion was a predictor of both attaining a leadership position and leader effectiveness as adults. However, we also measured basic social skills/competence and found that the extraversion “advantage” completely disappeared if we put social skills into the equation.

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In other words, it was only the extraverts who possessed social skills who became effective adult leaders. Similarly (and good news for introverts), introverts who possessed high levels of communication and social skills also tended to be in leadership positions and be effective. In short, skills were more important than traits (although both mattered because extraverts tend to have better social skills than introverts. Why? Practice!).

So, what is the bottom line?

All of this research suggests that leadership can indeed be developed and that good communication skills and the ability to establish quality relationships with others are important keys to effective leadership.

THE BASICS

What Is Personality?

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References

If you are interested in our Fullerton Longitudinal Study, which addresses far more than just leadership, you can visit [this website](#) and see published papers on four decades of research.

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