

Traits of Effective Leaders: A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT: Utilizing research to identify an effective leader is essential for creating a strategic business operational leadership model. The purpose of this literature review is to focus on select objective and less objective traits of leadership among individuals who are in those positions. We explore literature on objective leadership traits such as gender, age, education level, and job satisfaction level and on the less objective traits such as integrity, energy level, and business knowledge, among others. The goal is to evaluate the hypothesis that some, if not all, of these traits contribute significantly to effective leadership by analyzing the available literature about traits of an effective leader. We will explore the theories that have been proposed on this subject in the literature, identify to what degree researchers have investigated these theories, and try to confirm which of these traits continue to significantly be related to successful leadership. The purpose of this paper is to generate a thorough literature review which can later provide a reliable platform for further qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods research to create standards that business practices can utilize as a model for leadership identification and integration.

KEYWORDS: Leadership Traits, Gender, Age, Education, Effectiveness

Introduction

Scholars have defined leadership in different ways. Kotter (1999) stated that leadership inspires change in some fundamental ways in order to take advantage of new opportunities and that its function is to create the systems and organizations that managers need, and eventually, elevate them up to a whole new level. Northouse (2013) defined leadership as a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal. Yukl (2003) stated that leadership is the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives. It is important to note that the word “change” is standard in these definitions, implying that effective leadership drives positive change in an organization. If a leader is expected to influence change in an organization or a system, it is imperative to identify what traits or characteristics of a good leader set them apart from the others. This paper aims to identify a specific set of objective or subjective individual traits of a leader that can profoundly influence positive change in an organization.

The study addresses the theory that objective leadership traits such as sex, age, education level, and the less objective traits such as integrity, energy level, and business knowledge can affect one's ability to be an effective leader. The purpose of this literature review is multi-fold. First, we aim to identify which traits are supposedly contributing to effective leadership based on existing studies in the field. Then, we try to determine if the identified traits have significant impacts in terms of effectiveness as a leader or if the effectiveness is circumstantial and, therefore, not significant, by comparing and contrasting various research papers that analyse each trait. The literature review approach will help us to clearly identify existing theories and models of individual traits and effective leadership, explore and evaluate them, and can potentially help with the development of any new research in this field.

Influential leaders are not merely born or made; they are born with some leadership ability and develop that ability. They can add to their skills and fine-tune the ones they were born with (Johnson, Vernon, and McCarthy 1998). Whatever a person's leadership ability is, a person can develop their leadership skills to the level they choose (Lussier and Achua 2004). We hypothesize that certain traits such as age and gender can objectively affect effective leadership and while education and experience cannot always be developed, their impact on leadership effectiveness can be objectively quantified. On the other hand, less objective but critical traits

such as integrity, business knowledge, and energy level can be developed and can be measured using clear definitions and parameters. It is important to note that most of the leadership trait effectiveness research primarily relies on subjective evaluations (Judge, Piccolo, and Kosalka 2009). Thus, we start by focusing on the literature that discusses objective traits in the next section. Thereafter, we will discuss the less objective traits and their impact on effective leadership before offering a culminating discussion of the importance of these traits to a business. The goal is to create model that can be objectively tested using data in the field of effective leadership.

Objective Traits in Literature

We start our discussion by focusing on traits that cannot necessarily be developed through interventions but can be easily and quantitatively measured and compared across leaders. We focus on age, gender, and educational attainment. One can argue that educational attainment can be developed among leaders, but once an individual is in the workforce, the pursuit of educational goals often comes at the cost of sacrificing personal or professional time. This might prevent many people from actively pursuing educational attainment as they get more entrenched in the workforce or could result in taking significantly longer to get more education. Thus, considering education level as an objective trait that is measurable in terms of “years of schooling” is a better way to encapsulate the impact that educational attainment might have on an individual’s ability to be an effective leader. Even though it was identified that the traits examined had some effect on leadership levels, literature pointed more to outcomes within those traits. It was not precisely the objective trait itself, but characteristics tied to a specific trait that appear to impact effectiveness of a leader as we can show in the discussion below.

A. Age and Effective Leadership

While age is an easy-to-measure trait, the evidence from literature suggests that there is no clear indication of whether age impacts the ability to be an effective leader. Doherty (1997) used a Multi-Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) on a sample consisting of 114 leaders and found that younger leaders were more effective leaders than older leaders. Gilbert and Brenner (1998) collected data from 1634 leaders over three years and determined that younger leaders performed better and were more relationship oriented as compared to older leaders. But this outcome is not to be found in the literature on a consistent basis. For instance, Tabbarah, Crimmins, and Seeman (2002) performed a longitudinal three-site cohort study and Colcombe (2003) performed a literature analysis to conclude that older individuals were more effective as compared to their younger counterparts in terms of leading productive teams. Experiments done by Boerritger (2015) demonstrated that there was no significant link between age and leadership outcomes and that older leaders are neither better nor worse than younger leaders in achieving effective leadership.

Shore, Cleveland and Goldburg (2003) analysed information obtained from 185 managers (leaders) and 290 employees (followers) and found that the age of the leader and follower satisfaction were positively related among older followers but negatively related among younger followers. This result suggests that it is not the age of the leader, but rather it is the age of the followers that impacts effective leadership. A review of literature by Rosing and Jungmann (2015) suggested that differences in the age gap between the leaders and the followers was rather small and that more work is needed to be able to draw reliable conclusions on the consequences of age differences between leaders and followers in general and of younger leaders leading older followers specifically.

Evidence determined age did influence leadership, however the extent of the effect varied in different ages when examining the leader to follower. Additional evidence showed that one’s age was related to the style of leadership that was more closely related to that age and how certain styles had different effects depending on the leader to follower age gap (Boerritger 2015)

and that different ages displayed different styles, resulting in the ability to be an effective leader. An additional point that Doherty (1997) raised is that transformational leadership tends to occur more frequently among younger leaders than among older leaders. Moreover, emotional abilities of a leader have been shown to promote a range of outcomes that indicate effectiveness (Walter and Scheibe 2013), implying that if emotional abilities are positively associated with age, then effectiveness of a leader should also be positively associated with age. And while this contradicts what Doherty (1997) and Boerrigter (2015) found, it underlines the dilemma of whether age and leadership effectiveness are truly related to each other or there are other underlying factors that dominate. Colcombe (2003) examined the literature and concluded that older leaders had maintained higher cognitive control and physiological flexibility (Tabbarah, Crimmins, and Seeman 2002), which allowed them to utilize their accumulated knowledge and experience more effectively. Water and Scheibe (2013), was able to conclude from their literature review that older leaders may be able to effectively draw on their greater emotional knowledge and experiences, thus benefiting distinctly from improvements in emotion understanding and regulation. As such, the consequences of age-related gains in emotional abilities may prevail over associated losses in routine, stable, and less challenging situations, facilitating older leaders' effective leadership behaviors. Tohidi (2011) presented a thorough literature review and classification based on how leadership styles affect the outcomes of a team's productivity consistently. Leadership styles have been known to adapt and gain strength in their effectiveness as they evolve over time, indicating that effectiveness increases with an individual's age, not just because of the nominal aspect but due to the experience and emotional clarity that is likely to come with age (Eden 1990; Jacobs & Singell 1993; George and Bettenhausen 1990).

Cagle (1998) conducted a survey of 652 employees in a factory and concluded that age is one of the most critical factors that determines one's leadership style since it directs behaviors. Leadership effectiveness can also be related to either emotional or cultural attributes. Cultural attributes have been associated with different age groups or generations. Glass (2007) suggested that each age group possesses a generational persona recognized and determined by common age, location, shared beliefs, and behavior. Murphy, Anderson and Gorden (2004) found that there were value differences across different age groups. These differences indicated how the management style was affected in each age group, particularly when considering how individuals led their teams. An ethnographic study conducted by Ahiazu (1989) showed that cultural beliefs may affect perceived leadership effectiveness and be seen to be a function of one's age. When we look at emotional contributors related to age, literature has found that emotional experience influences one's behavior. Experiences are gained as one increases in age and the quality of these experiences affects how an individual behaves, especially in leadership roles (Watson, Wiese, Vaidya, and Tellegen 1999). Walter and Scheibe (2013) confirmed this observation when they found that emotional experience may serve as the mediating mechanism between age and leadership behavior. Thus, the biggest takeaway from the literature is that age and effectiveness of a leader have some relationship, whether it is direct or not cannot be confirmed or denied.

B. Gender and Effective Leadership

Gender is one of those native traits that an individual has that cannot be molded or developed. As more women enter leadership positions the debate over which gender is a more effective leader rages as strongly as ever. Even though more women are now in leadership positions, Zenger and Folkman (2012) showed that most leaders (64%) were still men, and the gender gap is even higher at higher levels of leadership. Within managers, directors, and executives, it was observed that if management was split into three tiers, 78% in the top tier, 67% in the middle tier, and 60% of the bottom tier of managers were men. This automatically implies that most of the research focusing on the role of gender in the literature might tend to be biased, primarily due to the lack of sufficient and equivalent female leadership. Literature shows that while many people do not consider gender as a direct trait impacting effective leadership, they do tend to consider gender-

related personality traits as the factor (Ayman and Korabik 2010) contributing to effective leadership. For instance, male leaders in a male dominated field like construction or in the military where male traits are more desirable in authoritarian leadership styles might be more effective due to the sheer expectations of certain behaviors in a leader that are supposedly “masculine.” This ultimately boils down to cultural and innate biases that might be a part of the “followers” rather than the leaders themselves in terms of how effective they are able to be in their roles. We state this because this conclusion is along the same lines that Rosing and Jungmann (2015) found regarding the relationship between age of followers and effectiveness of a leader.

Literature suggests that women's advantages are not confined to what are traditionally female strengths, but instead, these advantages are often seen at all levels. More women had been rated by their peers, bosses, direct reports, and other associates as better overall leaders than their male counterparts. Additional theoretical frameworks and literature surveys focusing on gender differences in leadership effectiveness show that when all leadership contexts are considered together, gender differences are insignificant or non-existent (Eagly and Karau 2002; Paustian-Underdahl, Walker, and Woehr 2014).

When considering leadership styles, meta-analysis of over 45 studies suggests that women have been found to use more effective leadership styles than men (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and Van Engen 2003). This meta-analysis examined the differences between men and women on leadership styles and found that women dominated in transformational, transactional, and *laissez-faire* leadership styles suggesting that women had a more transformational influence than men on their teams. Gender has been found to matter in specific industries where more dominant gender traits associated with specific leadership styles was found to be more effective. For instance, studies show that women leaders in male-dominated settings might be at a disadvantage in terms of selecting teams, or even being selected as leaders in the first place (Davidson and Burke 2000). Eagly, Makhijani and Klonsky (1992) had concluded that this occurred because women are, at times, devalued in male-dominated settings. On the other hand, Eagly, Karau, and Makhijani (1995) stated that women reported faring better in female-dominated settings, such as education and government or social services because their role and the expectation of their dominant traits matched up more closely. Similarly, Davidson and Burke (2004) found that men were preferred as leaders in more masculine or gender-neutral settings. In a study by Shahmandi, Siling and Ismail (2012) they suggested that their research strongly indicates that gender plays a significant role in leadership effectiveness in institutions of higher education. This is an interesting result because it indicates that females have better leadership effectiveness in a field that is otherwise dominated by males with 62% of males occupying full-time positions (National Center For Education Statistics 2017).

Overall, the literature suggests that intelligence and innovation amongst genders play a role in effective leaders. A large majority say that men and women display those qualities equally when it comes to intelligence and innovation, but they do make distinctions between men and women on certain leadership qualities. A survey conducted in 2015 by the PEW research center indicated the public sees little distinction between men and women on several leadership qualities, particularly the ones that are associated with supportiveness and dependability. Zenger and Folkman (2012) determined through surveys that women were rated higher in competencies that go into what they defined to be outstanding leadership at all levels. The two traits where women outscored men to the highest degree were taking initiative and the drive to attain meaningful result (Zenger and Folkman 2012). Ironically, these have long been thought of as mainly male strengths and it is likely that this misperception continues to have a hidden impact on the teams that are being led by women. It is important to note that in the Zenger and Folkman (2012) study, men outscored women significantly on only *one* management competency in this survey, and that was the ability to develop a strategic perspective. On a lighter note, we would like to state that based on these outcomes, the best strategic move that male leaders can make would be to hire more women in leadership positions that require taking initiative and driving home results.

C. Education or Intelligence and Effective Leadership

As mentioned earlier, one can argue that education is not necessarily a native trait and can be developed over time. However, given that the opportunity costs of gaining education increase substantially after entering the workforce, we can use education as a measurable trait that has the potential to impact effective leadership. In the literature, education is considered in two distinct ways; one is based on the degree earned and the other is based on the level of intelligence. While there tends to be a high correlation between level of intelligence and the highest degree earned by an individual, it does not always imply causality in either direction. Chamorro-Premuzic & Frankiewicz (2019) reviewed a series of meta-analyses testing the relationship between education level and job performance and found that the relationship is weak, at best. The literature in general, seems to indicate that higher educational levels can be associated with more effective leadership traits and the ability to effectively execute a variety of dynamic leadership styles. SMT (2016) showed that leaders with an MBA were rated higher on transformational leadership than those without, and Stout-Stewart (2005) found a positive relationship between education and all five Exemplary Leadership Practices measured on the Leadership Practices Inventory. Deary and Johnson (2010) suggested that more time in school does lead to greater intelligence, and if education level is determined to be a trait of effective leadership, then intelligence rather than education level would be the measuring factor. Besley, Montalvo, and Reynal-Querol (2011) performed an analysis of 1000 political leaders and found the view of heterogeneity amongst leaders that educational attainment is important is a result of having leaders who are more highly educated. Thus, leaders with higher education expect other leaders with higher levels of education to be more effective as an innate bias. However, this bias might not be entirely baseless. For instance, Green, Chavez, Lope and Gonzalas (2011) did a meta-analysis and found that educational attainment is positively associated with self-esteem, positive job attitudes, entrepreneurial success, social capital, and access to mentorship. They also found that higher levels of education increase the desire for leadership, integrity, charisma, team, and performance orientation (Green, Chavez, Lope, and Gonzalas. *et al* 2011). Thus, while the study did not test the relationship between effective leadership and education, it did find that higher educational levels allowed the attainment of certain traits that can affect one's ability to lead.

There are several data-driven arguments that question the actual, rather than the perceived value of a college degree and find that intelligence scores are a better indicator of job potential and therefore leadership effectiveness (Alves 2011; Johnson, et al. 2016). In his literature review, Deary and Johnson (2010) concluded that intelligence has a strong causal effect on educational results, suggesting that any relationships to effective leadership considering education level can be related more to intelligence. In contrast, Lahoti and Sahoo (2016) determined that education has no impact on a leader's effectiveness and empathize with the problems plaguing his or her constituency. Literature did not give any definite relationships between education level and effective leadership directly but suggests that higher educational level creates the strengths associated with effective leadership.

Mattson (1996) found that is difficult to retain the loyalty of followers or to obtain cooperation and support from peers and superiors without integrity. Lussier and Achua (2004) referred to integrity as a behavior that is honest and ethical, thus making a leader trustworthy. Trustworthiness is an essential aspect of business success and relationship building. For a leader to have followers, those followers must be able to trust their leader. Oosthuizen (2004) was able to show that leaders have above-average intelligence and that this intelligence was not directly related to IQ scores, but more significantly related to business practice or intelligence and knowledge of the business itself. This result suggests that a formal education may not be the key variable in effective leadership. Like our other so-called objective traits of age and gender, educational attainment also shows a mixed bag of results in the literature. However, a common thread that runs through all of these articles is that there are some intangible aspects that each of these traits contribute towards creating effective leaders, and therefore using them as control variables could help explain some of the fluctuations that occur when considering the effectiveness of a leader.

Subjective or Less Objective Traits in Literature

In literature on effective leadership, various traits that have been analyzed and they range from being concrete or objective to extremely subjective traits. Gibson, Ivancevich, and Donnelly (2000) stated that the general approach in the literature on Trait Theory appears to assume that only a finite number of individual traits can be attributed to effective leaders. We considered the primary objective traits in the previous section so we will briefly consider some subjective or less objective traits in this section. Studies have reported that these traits contribute to leadership success, but it is essential to remember that leadership success is, neither primarily nor completely, a function of these or other traits. Lekganyane and Oosthuizen (2006), surveyed 3080 participants at the middle management levels and found that integrity, intelligence, and high energy were the dominant traits that subordinates valued in their leaders from the survey data. Job satisfaction has also been identified as a prominent factor associated with effective leadership in the literature (De Groot, Kiker and Cross 2000).

A. Job Satisfaction and Effective Leadership

Bedeian, Ferris, and Kacmar (1992) conducted hierarchical polynomial regression analysis and found that tenure was a stable predictor of job satisfaction. De Groot, Kiker, and Cross (2000) followed up on this research and reported a high level of significance between effective leadership and job satisfaction via meta-analytics. Conger, Kanungo and Menon (2000) also confirmed that effective leadership is related to several factors, of which tenure was crucial. ANOVA analysis by Vlachos, Panagopoulos, and Rapp (2013) displayed a more substantial leadership-follower relationship when there is higher job satisfaction. Effective leadership can then be tied to strong relationships and these relationships gain strength as the leader has tenure. Tenure is gained from higher levels of job satisfaction in the leader position. Thus, tenure and leadership skills are intricately related to each other and as both of these grow, so does the effectiveness of a leader.

Job satisfaction and leadership effectiveness relations can be displayed in the leader and the follower's job satisfaction. Research has shown that when both the leaders and the followers are satisfied in their jobs, the effectiveness of the leader and the willingness of the followers to adapt to the leader's vision are both higher (Volmer, Niessen, Spurk, Linz, and Abele 2011). Literature also reveals that happiness measures, including job satisfaction, directly affect the effectiveness of a leader (Lyubomirsky, King and Diener 2005; Diener, Kesebir and Lucas 2008; Boehm and Lyubomirsky 2008). Happy people are judged as strong performers and show increased creativity and problem-solving skills, are more involved in their jobs, receive more benefits in the form of interpersonal rewards, and were more likely to remain at their jobs (have tenure). Volmer, Niessen, Spurk, Linz, and Abele (2011) stated that in terms of the Broaden-and-Build Theory (Fredrickson 1998; 2001), a positive attitude builds resources, which in then helps when establishing positive and rewarding social interactions.

Goleman and Boyatzis (2008) found that the ability to have social interactions and processes had strong and positive effects on leadership and related effectiveness. Thus, leaders who have a high level of job satisfaction also have positive social interactions and can influence their followers positively thereby leading to a multi-dimensional effectiveness that changes the organization for the better. Additionally, Volmer, Niessen, Spurk, Linz, and Abele (2011) stated that positive job attitudes (job satisfaction) lead employees toward contributing rather than withholding inputs. Ketchum and Trist (1992) presented six aspects of "objective characteristic of meaningful work" and one of them was the ability to contribute. Volmer, Niessen, Spurk, Linz, and Abele (2011) found that as leaders contribute more towards their job and their teams, their level of effectiveness in leading a group increases, thereby leading to higher levels of job-satisfaction, setting in motion a positive cycle of change.

B. Drive and Effective Leadership

Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991) indicated that effective leadership comes from “drive”, which is simply a broad term that includes personal characteristics such as achievement, motivation, ambition, energy, tenacity, and initiative. Bateman and Snell (1999) found that leaders tend to have a higher drive and work harder to achieve both, their personal as well as the company’s goals. They also have the enthusiasm and do not give up. They have a high tolerance for frustration as they strive to overcome obstacles through preparation. They take the initiative to bring about improvements rather than ask permission. This suggests that when a leader acts based on their own “drive” they will display a more effective leadership style. As we discussed earlier, Zenger and Folkman (2012) found that even though drive has been traditionally considered to be a male-dominant trait, more female leaders dominate in terms of having this intangible “drive.” When it comes to subjective traits, all the aspects we covered under “drive” can be individually analyzed and compiled. However, subjective and intangible values are usually challenging to measure and are too dynamic to be fit into a neat little model. Thus, not many quantitative studies have been done using these traits in the literature.

Conclusions and Future Scope

In this paper, we have presented some selected traits that appear to affect an individual’s ability to be an effective leader. While the literature shows that displaying certain traits alone does not guarantee leadership success, there is evidence that effective leaders are different from other people in certain vital respects and there are certain core individual traits that can lead to effective leadership. We found that the literature is full of mixed results when it comes to directly relating individual traits such as age, gender, educational attainment, tenure, job satisfaction, and drive with the effectiveness of an individual as a leader. However, a common theme in the literature is the fact that none of the research discounts these individual traits, suggesting that there could be some intervention variables that directly impact effectiveness but are in turn affected by these traits. There could also be relationships between and among these individual traits that should be considered separately. For instance, it would be interesting to study whether males more likely to enter fields such as business or if females are more likely to enter fields such as education. And if these educational choices are driven by gender-dominant traits, the characteristics required for effective leadership in these fields are also likely to be affected by this string of choices that individuals make in their lifetime. Our paper does not attempt to answer or address these questions, but our current analysis raises the possibility of studying these questions in a separate context to analyze what makes a truly effective leader, and whether the type of effective leadership looks different in different fields.

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