WHAT PERSONALITY TRAITS MAKE AN EFFECTIVE LEADER?

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Abstract

The recent wave of negativity stemming from corporate and geopolitical problems call attention to the need for more positive leadership in the world, and the result has been a re-emphasis in the use of a personality traits' lens for leadership theory, research, and practice (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003; Luthans, 2002a, 2002b; Luthans & Youssef, 2007). Cameron (2008) refers to three connotations of the concept of 'positive': (1) a focus on positively deviant performance that dramatically exceeds the norm in a positive direction; (2) an orientation toward strengths rather than weaknesses, supportive rather than critical communication; (3) a focus on virtuousness. It is stated that human lives operate in accordance with heliotropic effect, which is the tendency in all living systems toward something that gives live and away from something that depletes it (Cameron, 2008). This effect can be applied to organizational processes as well. However, what is 'light' and what 'gives life' in management of organizations? Definitions of effective leadership vary across different cultures and economic systems, and this offers a premise that different factors are bringing life to organizations as well as different factors can devastate its survival. Recent research has revealed universal factors that can be applied to any given organizational and leadership context. This implies personality traits of leaders, and these new trends are discussed in this article. The article also presents the results of research which aimed to study the relationship between leaders personality traits and constructive thinking in Lithuanian public organizations (n=105).

Keywords: leadership, personality, constructive thinking.

1. Effective servant leadership

Classical Peter Drucker's model of effective leadership does not involve coercing people, silencing individuals with fear, or utilizing humiliating tactics to carry out orders (Maciariello, 2011, p. 246). Complementing is the model of 'servant leadership', proposed by Robert Greenleaf (1970); it involves providing subordinates with a considerable degree of freedom based on trust and respect. Jim Collins proposed idea of 'great leaders', who possesses the quality of humility (Collins, 2001). However, in competitive and constantly changing environments, human recourse management professionals, while selecting and recruiting top level managers, often pay attention primarily not to humility of a proposed applicant. They search for strong, self - confident personalities who apparently seem talented to reach the goals of a given organization. Nevertheless, this course of action might have problematical end-results and even lead to a crash of some organizational processes.

2. Self-confident, but dangerous leaders

Contemporary leadership psychology acknowledges that some leaders are motivated by goals and values, but some are motivated by greed or big egos (Babiak, 2007). However, as Paul Babiak and Robert D. Hare, the authors of book *Snakes in Suites* (2007) states, there are some individuals who allow the responsibilities of leadership and the perks of power to override their moral sense. The authors call attention of HR managers to psychopathic personality disorder rooted in lying, manipulation, deceit, egocentricity, callousness, and other potentially destructive traits. Babiak and Hare affirm that some organizations quite naively recruit individuals with psychopathic tendencies because some hiring managers may mistakenly attribute "leadership" labels to what are, in actuality, psychopathic behaviors. For example, taking charge, making decisions, the appearance of confidence, strength, calm, and getting others to do what you want are classic features of leadership and management, yet they can also be well-packaged forms of coercion, domination, and manipulation. These 'leaders' abuse coworkers and, by lowering morale and stirring up conflict, the organization itself. Some may even steal and defraud. Their destructive personality characteristics are invisible to most of the people with whom they interact. However, their egocentricity, callousness, and insensitivity became vivid sooner or later. Some of them appear to be gracious, engaging, and fun. Some are masters at impression management, they have a talent for presenting their good side to those they feel matter, all the while denying, discounting, discarding, and displacing anyone who do not agree with their decisions. Their aggression and violence tend to be predatory in nature: cold-blooded and devoid of the intense emotional upheaval that typically accompanies the violent acts of most people. Psychopaths are without conscience and incapable of empathy, guilt, or loyalty to anyone but themselves. Some psychopaths do not technically break the law - although they may come close, with behavior that usually is very unlikable for those around them. Hervey Cleckley in his book *The Mask of Sanity* (1941) described that psychopaths may come across as having a superficial charm and good intelligence, they are often entertaining and can tell creative, believable stories. Their insight into the psyche of others combined with a superficial, but convincing verbal fluency allows them to change their external image skillfully as it suits the situation and their game plan. Narcissistic people will find psychopaths to be caring of their need to get attention; anxious people will find them to be nonthreatening and reassuring; many will find them stimulating and fun to be with. A psychopath can appear strong, naive, dominant, honest, submissive, trustworthy, worldly, or whatever he or she believes will get others to respond positively to manipulative overtures. The difference between the psychopathic approach and the non psychopathic approach lies in motivation to take unfair and insensitive advantage of people. Psychopaths simply do not care if what they say and do hurts people as long as they get what they want, and they are very good at hiding this fact. Some do not have enough social or communicative skill or education to interact successfully with others, relying instead on threats, coercion, intimidation, and violence to dominate others and to get what they want. Typically, such individuals are manifestly aggressive and rather nasty, and unlikely to charm victims into submission, relying on their bullying approach instead (Babiak, 2007).

3. Can negative leadership work for positive results?

The example of psychopathic leadership and amoral striving for personal and corporate success is given in Stanley Bing' book *What Would Machiavelli Do?* The author tells how to *get what you want when you want it whether you deserve it or not. Without fear. Without emotion. Without finger-wagging morality*: (1) Be coldhearted: *Replace decency and thoughtfulness with insensitivity and hardheartedness.* (2) Work hard to become bad: *Most people aren't naturally horrendous . . . but with work we can improve.* (3) Be narcissistic: *View others solely as a function of your needs . . . You have enormous selfishness within you . . . Let it out.* (4) Be unpredictable: *Very nice. Very mean. Big, big swings. Gigantic pleasure. Towering rage.*

(5) Be ruthless: For your competitors and those who would bring you down, "*Crush them. Hear their bones break, their windpipes snap.*" As Babiak and Hare (2007) mentions, U.S. Attorney Patrick Meehan had said: "If the lessons of September 11 and the Asian tsunami are learned, some coldhearted, evil scam artists will use this occasion to perpetrate fraud, lining their own pockets at the expense of the hurricane victims." In fact, psychopathic leaders are ready to make a buck out of someone else's tragedy. Because they see most people as weak, inferior, and easy to deceive, psychopathic artists will often tell you that their victims deserved what they got. Moreover, their grandiose sense of self-importance leads them to believe that other people exist just to take care of them. Another characteristic of psychopaths is an ability to avoid taking responsibility for things that go wrong; instead, they blame others, circumstances, fate, and so forth. As Babiak and Hare (2007) notes, many psychopaths would clearly be rated very low on consideration (rude, arrogant, and self-centered), at the extreme when it comes to structuring jobs (either uncaring or overbearing), and very low on conscientiousness (impulsive, arrogant, self-centered, and seemingly unwilling to accept responsibility). Another group of psychopaths is much more aggressive. This group, the corporate bullies, is primarily abusive rather than charming. According to Babiak and Harre, bullies are not as sophisticated or as smooth as the manipulative type, as they rely on coercion, abuse, humiliation, harassment, aggression, and fear to get their way. They are callous to almost everyone, intentionally finding reasons to engage in conflict, to blame others for things that go wrong, to attack others unfairly (in private and in public) and to be generally antagonistic. They lack any insight into their own behavior, and seem unwilling or unable to moderate it, even when it is to their own advantage. However, some psychopaths are able to convince a large number of people that they are their best friends, trusted confidants, loyal coworkers, and all-around good people with whom to associate. Does this kind of leadership gives added value to society? Peter Drucker says that effective leadership is not 'making friends and influencing people'; effective leaders lead followers with dignity and inspire them toward achievement (Drucker, 2008, p. 288). Therefore, a study was conducted to evaluate leaders' personality traits in Lithuanian organizations. Based on the theory building and research to date on personality traits and the related constructs we have hypothesized that there would be statistically significant differences in personality traits of leaders in Lithuanian organizations, however, the results may vary depending on other respondents' characteristics.

4. Methods

This study used a test design utilizing a heterogeneous random sample of 105 working adults representing a wide cross-section of Lithuanian organizations including service and government. Participants were sent an e-mail by the researchers or personally asked to participate in the study. The subjects of the study were 45 men and 60 women. The data were gathered by Inga Vaidelauskiene. Additional demographics of the sample included a mean age of 38.9 years. The measures used in this study included: (1) NEO-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) to measure *neuroticism, extraversion, and openness to experience*, *agreeableness, and conscientiousness*. The test was developed in 1990's by Paul T. Costa, Jr. and Robert R. McCrae for use with adult (17+) men and women without overt psychopathology. The NEO-FFI has 60 items (12 items per domain). For the NEO FFI the internal consistencies reported in the manual were: N = .79, E = .79, O = .80, A = .75, C = .83. (2) Constructive Thinking Inventory (CTI), a 108-item self-report inventory that assesses constructive and destructive beliefs and thinking patterns. The CTI is based on Dr. Epstein's Cognitive-Experiential Self-Theory. According to this theory, people have two fundamental adaptive systems: an "experiential system" that automatically learns from lived experience, and a "rational/intellectual system" that operates by conscious reasoning. The CTI measures the efficacy of the experiential system; intelligence tests measure the efficacy of the rational/intellectual system The CTI predicts a variety of desirable abilities/states, that are either unrelated or only very weakly related to intellectual intelligence, including

work performance, social skills, and emotional and physical well-being. All responses for the questionnaires were anchored on a 6-point Likert scale: 1 - *strongly disagree*, 2 - *disagree*, 3 – *not sure*, 4 - *agree*, 5 – *strongly agree*. Each questionnaire demonstrated acceptable reliability in the study (see Table 1):

Table 1. Reliability of NEO-FFI and CTI in the study of leaders of Lithuanian organizations

Scales	Crobach Alpha
NEO-FFI	
Neuroticism	0,796
Openness to experience	0,753
Extraversion	0,697
Agreeableness	0,718
Conscientiousness	0,785
CTI	
Global constructive thinking	0,835

5. Results

The results of the study are shown in Table 2. Given the focus of the study, the comparison of means was determined to be the appropriate statistical technique.

Table 2. Means of the NEO-FFI and the CTI scales (n=105)

Scales	Min.	Max.	Mean	Standard deviation
Neuroticism	28,04	68,97	46,12	10,45
Openness to experience	32,60	74,20	54,85	9,61
Extraversion	18,60	74,96	53,83	12,09
Agreeableness	27,67	68,63	52,89	11,08
Conscientiousness	20,26	71,46	52,99	10,21
Global constructive thinking	83,00	135,00	110,37	13,73

Table 3 shows gender differences in the NEO-FFI and the CTI scales (n=105) in leaders of Lithuanian organizations. As it can be observed, women have statistically significantly higher rates of openness to experience than men (p=0,03).

Table 3. Gender differences in the NEO-FFI and the CTI scales (n=105), T-test

Scales	Gender	N	Mean	Standard deviation	t-test	p
Neuroticism	Male	45	45,2730	10,755	1,774	0,079
	Female	60	48,0686	10,041		
Extraversion	Male	45	57,1854	7,228	1,614	0,110
	Female	60	49,5506	10,958		
Openness to experience	Male	45	55,0355	9,793	2,19	**0,03**
	Female	60	51,0827	13,222		
Agreeableness	Male	45	52,8394	10,868	0,596	0,552
	Female	60	53,0369	11,297		
Conscientiousness	Male	45	54,4498	7,308	-0,313	0,755
	Female	60	49,6794	11,998		
Global constructive thinking	Male	45	110,2603	13,609	1,184	0,239
	Female	60	110,6250	13,779		

As it is shown in Table 4, there are some statistically significant relationships between personality traits (NEO-FFI) and constructive thinking (CTI). Global constructive thinking is statistically significantly negatively related to neuroticism (r=-0,668, p=0,000), and statistically significantly positively related to extraversion, and openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. As it can be observed, some other correlations between personality traits and thinking patterns were found.

Table 4. Relationship between personality traits (NEO-FFI) and constructive thinking (CTI), Pearson correlation

		Neuroticism	*Extraversion*	*Openness to experience*	*Agreeableness*	*Conscientiousness*
Global constructive thinking	r	-0,668	0,239	0,351	0,121	0,024
	p	**0,000**	**0,014**	**0,000**	0,218	0,811
Emotional coping	r	-0,625	0,208	0,321	0,066	-0,091
	p	**0,000**	**0,033**	**0,001**	0,503	0,358
Behavioral coping	r	-0,602	0,443	0,397	0,135	0,272
	p	**0,000**	**0,000**	**0,000**	0,169	0,005
Superstitious thinking	r	0,510	-0,164	-0,403	0,055	0,147
	p	**0,000**	0,095	**0,000**	0,579	0,135
Esoteric thinking	r	0,243	0,524	0,228	0,079	0,006
	p	**0,013**	**0,000**	**0,019**	0,424	0,955
Categorical thinking	r	0,264	0,122	-0,311	-0,372	0,195
	p	**0,007**	0,215	**0,001**	**0,000**	**0,046**
Naive optimism	r	-0,113	0,585	0,253	-0,070	0,235
	p	0,249	**0,000**	**0,009**	0,480	**0,016**

As it can be seen in Table 5, Linear regression analysis of personality traits (NEO-FFI) and constructive thinking (CTI) of leaders in Lithuanian organizations (n=105) showed that openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness can be important in predicting the global constructive thinking of leaders.

Table 5. Linear regression analysis of personality traits and constructive thinking of leaders in Lithuanian organizations (n=105)

Components of the model	Non Standartized coefficients		Standartized coefficients	t	p
	Beta	Std. errot	Beta		
Constanta	153,700	9,826		15,643	0,000
Neuroticism	-0,942	0,094	-0,717	-9,972	**0,000**
Extraversion	0,061	0,122	0,043	0,500	0,618
Openness to experience	0,257	0,091	0,226	2,836	**0,006**
Agreeableness	0,077	0,089	0,062	0,863	0,390
Conscientiousness	-0,399	0,109	-0,297	-3,656	**0,000**

Dependent variable: Global constructive thinking

To sum up, the study revealed some statistically significant relations between personality traits and constructive thinking in the group of leaders of various Lithuanian organizations. Moreover, it showed that openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness can be essential in prognosticating the global constructive thinking of leaders.

6. Conclusions

1. Definitions of effective leadership vary across different cultures and economic systems, and this offers a premise that different factors are functional to organizations as well as different factors can devastate its survival.

2. Recent research has revealed universal factors that can be applied to any given organizational context, and this implies personality traits of leaders.

3. Classical models of effective servant leadership does not involve coercing people, silencing individuals with fear, or utilizing humiliating tactics to carry out orders, but involves humble providing subordinates with a considerable degree of freedom based on trust and respect.

4. Psychopathic leaders can bring destruction to organizations and society, as psychopathic personality disorder is rooted in lying, manipulation, deceit, egocentricity, callousness, and other potentially destructive traits.

5. The study, conducted in Lithuania, complements the previous studies done in various countries. It showed some statistically significant relations between personality traits and constructive thinking in the group of leaders of various Lithuanian organizations. It demonstrated that openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness can be essential in prognosticating the global constructive thinking of leaders. Nonetheless, supplementary research is needed, and this would have added value to research on leadership effectiveness.

7. Literature

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