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## **The Cult of Personality**

by

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ARTICLE:  
The Cult of Personality



**How successful, on average, are US companies when it comes to identifying, hiring, and promoting people into leadership roles?**

Companies obviously want the hire to work out well. Yet, there is lots of information suggesting that for many organizations – it doesn't. Check out the following conclusions from research into this area:

- *Dr Talya Bauer*, professor of management at Portland State University, writes that 50% of senior (management level) outside hires fail within 18 months of starting a new position.<sup>2</sup>
- *Egon Zehnder International*, a strategic advisory and search firm, reports that when it comes to retaining executive talent, many companies experience failure rates in excess of 50%.<sup>1</sup>
- *The Wynhurst Group*<sup>4</sup> found that the cost of losing an employee in the first year is estimated to be *at least three times salary!*

Obviously, there's something amiss with the traditional approach to identifying, hiring, and promoting leaders in US organizations. So, what's going on here and how do you fix it?

**Enter the Leadership Assessment Business Opportunity...  
A Mistake If There Ever Was One**

For decades, legions of consultants have made millions, if not billions, of dollars offering organizations the comfort of letting an assessment tell them if someone has what it takes to be an effective leader. Yet, with all that "science," and all that initial comfort, look back at the above paragraph of this article and remind yourself of just what kind of outcomes these attempts to assess for leadership emergence and effectiveness are actually producing! *How comfortable are you now?*

There is an interesting article published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*<sup>5</sup> that is a review of key research done historically on the relationship between personality and leadership effectiveness. It's goal was to summarize the research issues and make recommendations for future research that could address the gaps. The article is titled: *Personality and Leadership: A Qualitative and Quantitative Review*. **Let's take a quick look at a couple interesting quotes from that article:**

*"It is telling that, except for self-confidence, no [personality] trait emerged as related to leadership in a majority of these reviews."*

*"One of the biggest problems in past research relating personality to leadership is the lack of structure in describing personality, leading to a wide range of traits being investigated under different labels."*

*"If one were to ask five leadership researchers, in general, whether [personality] trait theory was valid and, if so, specifically which traits were valid, one would likely get five different answers."*

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**This suggests a rather profound insight:** that leadership emergence and effectiveness do not seem to be based on personality. Therefore, assessments that attempt to align personality traits as reliable predictors of leadership emergence or effectiveness should themselves be used cautiously, at best. Judging from the conclusions of the referenced studies on page one of this article, the common attempts to rely on such assessments are simply not producing very desirable outcomes. Hence my note of caution: buyer beware.

### Leadership Effectiveness Must Be Developed

My business partner and I have over 70 years of combined business experience. We have noticed a rather simple, practical, and obvious fact: *experienced leaders are more effective than inexperienced leaders*. Therefore, we think it's safe to conclude that leadership effectiveness is *learned*. What we observe in the world is that it is learned by introverts and extroverts alike and capable individuals of all different personality types. The real key to leadership effectiveness, then, is not to focus on the leader's personality, but rather on *what the leader is learning about how to lead effectively*, and *what is the leader's behavior producing or not producing*. This is where we put our energy and effort in the leadership development work we do with organizations; and it works. [Click here for a short video testimonial to this effect.](#)

If nothing else, the simplicity of this reality should bring home the importance to any organization of investing in *developing leadership* in their people - not just hoping that somehow it will magically emerge based on personality, subject matter expertise, or because some assessment says that it should. Rather than spending millions on such assessments, how about investing intentionally to build a program focused on *developing* leadership capabilities in your people? So that all your leaders are more effective!

We suggest that whatever your ideas about leadership, perhaps there is one thing we can all agree on: *effective leadership is all about producing desired results*. It is this central idea that has shaped our view of leadership. Here's our definition:

*“Leadership involves creating and maintaining a state of affairs that allows for the actions that will produce desired outcomes.”*



Results happens through action. We find that, more than any other thing, the environment, conversations, and relationships created by the leader are vitally important to people's actions, and therefore, the results produced. We call these things the *state of affairs*. Hence, in the end, the quality of the *state of affairs* has a lot to do with the quality of leadership; not personality nor subject matter expertise. So, if you wish to be a more effective leader, it stands to reason you will want to better understand what it is that's influencing and controlling the actions of your team and how you can optimally influence those actions. **This is where we put our leadership development focus.**

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## The Importance of Authenticity

Since every organization is different, the actions that will lead to desired outcomes may be different in each organization. Furthermore, since each leader is unique in the combination of their social capital, competence, and character, a certain behavior performed by one leader may produce great outcomes while the same behavior performed by a different leader may produce terrible results.

You can't lead effectively by checklist or trying to be something you are not. Each leader needs to develop their own authentic path of leadership. If inherent personality traits and performing certain behaviors off a checklist were indicative of leadership effectiveness, then everyone with those personality traits or performing those behaviors would have people saying they were great leaders. But that is not what we have observed in the real world. It is also not what those who study these things seem to be finding in their research; and for us, since so many organizations are following the personality and trait assessment path these days, it certainly helps explain why the statistics from page one show such an abysmal success rate for new management hires.

## Conclusion

We suggest that leadership readiness is not objective and formula driven; you cannot assess your way to identifying great leaders - you must invest in *developing* them. Truly great leadership involves human beings granting trust to another human being. Trust is not personality driven, has nothing to do with authority, and surprisingly little to do with the subject matter expertise of the leader. Just because you are an expert at something does not automatically translate into people deciding to follow you - no matter how much you know. Instead, trust is about something far deeper. It's about *values* and *action*. **The leader's job is centered around clarifying, aligning, and producing in action and outcomes what's deemed important and useful for the organization and those it serves.**

If this kind of approach to leadership resonates with you and you would like to learn more about some of the concepts and ideas within this article, please reach out to us. We would enjoy speaking with you about how we can be helpful to you and your organization in enhancing leadership readiness and organization performance.

Sincerely,



Kirk Anderson, Managing Principal  
**ACTIONPOINTE**, LLC

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CITATIONS:

- 1 Executive On-boarding: How to Settle in a New Hire, by Anna Munn, Edwint H. Smelt, Ashley R. Stephenson, and Timan Gerhardt, Egon Zehnder International, April 11, 2007.
- 2 Bauer, Talya, N., Ph.D (2012) Onboarding New Employees: Maximizing Success. SHRM Foundation
- 3 Help New Hires Succeed: Beat the Statistics. Caela Farren, Ph.D.
- 4 "SHRM Presentation" by The Wynhurst Group, April 2007.
5. Personality and Leadership: A Qualitative and Quantitative Review, Journal of Applied Psychology 2002, Vol 87, No 4, 765-780, © 2002, The American Psychological Association, Inc., Timothy Judge, Joyce Bono, Remus Ilies, Megan Gerhardt.

RESOURCE LINKS:

**ARTICLES:**

- [ARTICLE: What There Really Is To Manage](#)  
[ARTICLE: The Leader's Choice: Will You Be Powerful?](#)

**VIDEOS:**

- [Managing Conversations Around Circumstances](#)  
[What is the Leadership Foundations Course All About?](#)  
[The Importance of Struggle & Our Attitude Toward It](#)  
[Leadership Testimonial - Jeff Singsaas, Microsoft](#)

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