Topic 2 Traits, Motives, and Characteristics of Leaders

Introduction
Are some individuals endowed with special qualities that allow them to lead?
Why is one person more successful than another?
Can we find universal personality traits and characteristics that leaders have to some greater degree than non-leaders?

Although much research has been undertaken to uncover a relationship between personality traits and leader success, we continue in our attempt to understand why some individuals are more effective leaders. The focus is on their personal characteristics often called traits. These traits vary in importance according to the position or situation in which they are practiced. Thus a good leader uses situational leadership to adapt their personal traits to the respective leader-follower environment. Some of these traits are learned abilities and skills and not inherited physical or personal characteristics that a leader possesses at birth.

Learning Objectives
The purpose of this week is to present a comprehensive description of the personal qualities of leaders:

- Identify general and task-related traits that contribute to leadership effectiveness.
- Describe how emotional intelligence contributes to leadership effectiveness.
- Identify key motives that contribute to leadership effectiveness.
- Describe cognitive factors associated with leadership effectiveness.
- Describe the heredity versus environment issue in relation to leadership effectiveness.
- Summarize the strengths and weaknesses of the trait approach to leadership.

Leadership Characteristics

Trait-Based Leadership Perspective
When people evaluate managers in terms of their leadership effectiveness, they often scrutinize the manager’s traits and personal characteristics. Traits tend to help us understand leadership behaviour and effectiveness. So what do you think when you hear a statement that effective leaders are made of the “right stuff”? What is the right stuff? Broadly speaking successful leaders may exhibit intelligence, verbal skills, originality, scholarship, knowledge, dependability, initiative, self-confidence, sociability, cooperativeness, popularity, interest in followers, drive, desire to lead, honesty and integrity and job-relevant knowledge. The list goes on…

In general, the characteristics associated with leadership are classified into three broad categories: Personality Traits; Leadership Motives & Needs; Cognitive Factors and Intelligence.

Personality Traits of Effective Leaders
In this category we look at leaders who have certain personality traits or competencies that contribute to leadership effectiveness in many situations i.e. as long as the leader’s style fits the situation reasonably well. The leader’s personality traits can be divided into two groups: General and Task.
General Personality Traits refers to those traits observable both within and outside the context of work and are related to success and satisfaction in both work and personal life. These traits include:

Self Confidence, which is akin to being cool under pressure.

Humility is having the ability to admit that you don't know everything and admitting your mistakes to team members and outsiders. Being modest, yet determined to achieve their objectives.

Self-Evaluation covers the four traits of self-esteem, locus of control, generalized self-efficacy and emotional stability, which are positively related to each other.

Trustworthiness refers to an individual’s honesty, integrity and credibility, thus engendering trust. Trust is a person’s confidence in another individual's intentions and motives and in the sincerity of that individual's word.

Authenticity is your capacity to be yourself, be genuine and honest about your personality, values and beliefs, as well as having integrity.

Extraversion is a characteristic of extraverted individuals who assume a leadership role and participate in group activities.

Assertiveness is being forthright in expressing demands, opinions, feelings and attitudes.

Enthusiasm, Optimism, and Warmth helps build good relationships, provides an upbeat mood and gives emotional support.

Sense of Humour helps dissolve tension and defuse conflict.

Task-Related Traits refers to those traits closely associated with task accomplishment. These traits include:

Passion for the Work and the People Being passionate about the nature of the business can be a major success factor in its survival.

Emotional Intelligence - Manages own emotions and those of others. Four key factors are included in emotional intelligence: self-awareness which helps you understand your impact on others; self-management refers to the ability to control one’s emotions and act with honesty and integrity in a consistent and adaptable manner; social awareness includes having empathy for others and having intuition about organizational problems; relationship management, which includes the interpersonal skills of communicating clearly and convincingly, disarming conflicts and building strong personal bonds.

Flexibility and Adaptability to cope with and facilitate change and adjusting to situations.

Internal Locus of Control carries the belief that they are the primary cause of events happening to them and assumes responsibility for events.

Courage takes risks and initiatives and shows a willingness to put one’s reputation on the line.
There is no one best formula. Few leaders will have all the traits or competencies mentioned. In fact most people will find the list of attributes and characteristics somewhat daunting. Do not think rigidly about the attributes of leaders. Individuals will prefer to adopt traits or competencies that suit them at the time and may vary these traits as the situation changes. Thus success is very much individual and situational.

Leadership Motives

Effective leaders have frequently been distinguished by their motives and needs, especially when leaders have an intense desire to occupy a position of responsibility for others and to control them. This desire is evident in such motives and needs as: Power; Drive and Achievement; Tenacity and Resilience.

The **power motive** is when the effective leader has a strong need to control resources and use their **personalized power motive** to further their own interest, whereas a **socialized power motive** seeks to achieve organisational goals or vision.

The **drive and achievement motive** describe leaders who are known for working hard to achieve their goals. Drive is the propensity to put forth high energy towards achieving goals and to be persistent in applying that energy. Achievement is the desire to find joy in accomplishment of their goals or their vision.

**Tenacity and resilience** are motivational characteristics. Tenacity is a useful trait when implementing a new program or to consummate a new business deal. The tenacious leader is resilient and is capable of bouncing back from a setback through their continuous efforts.

Cognitive Factors and Leadership

Cognition is the mental process or faculty by which knowledge is gathered. Thus mental ability as well as personality is important for leadership success. In addition effective leaders must have problem-solving and intellectual skills to gather, process and store essential information. Problem solving and intellectual skills can be referred to collectively as cognitive factors.

Cognitive Factors include: **Cognitive or analytical intelligence**, which is having a strong problem-solving ability; **Practical intelligence** requires a technical or professional competence, with strong knowledge of business, which is critical for strategy formulation; **Creativity**, which is the ability of arriving at imaginative and original solutions to complex problems; **Insight into people and situations** is a depth of understanding that requires considerable intuition and common sense, makes good choices and adapts style to situation; and **farsightedness and conceptual thinking**, which is the ability to understand the long-range implications of actions and policies, to see the overall perspective and makes farsightedness possible. A conceptual thinker is also a **systems thinker**.

Influence of Heredity and Environment on Leadership

Are leaders born or made?
Does heredity or environment contribute more to leadership effectiveness?

Your leadership potential may have been helped along if you were born with reasonable intelligence and good mental capacity, as well as physical energy. In addition early childhood experiences of success or failure, encouragement or criticism, experimentation or discipline influence your leadership potential, confidence and need for achievement. Thus the traits, motives, and characteristics required for leadership effectiveness are considered a combination of heredity and environment. Personality traits and mental ability are based on certain inherited predispositions and aptitudes, which, however, require the right opportunity to
develop. Individuals inherit a basic capacity to develop personality traits and mental ability that sets an outer limit on how extensively these traits can be developed. Environmental influences, in turn, determine how much of an individual’s potential will be developed.

Thus leadership is a combination of inherited and learned factors. Often cited characteristics of effective leaders such as verbal communications (including listening), managing time and stress, managing individual decisions, recognizing, defining and solving problems, motivating and influencing others, delegating, setting goals and articulating a vision, self-awareness, team building and managing conflict are all skills that are all behavioural. That means these skills can be taught and learned. On a cautionary note, learning to lead is not just about skills training, it is about educating yourself with information, and knowledge engendering wisdom, humility, compassion and respect - all fundamental aspects to effective leadership. Examining your own personal experiences, becoming your unique whole self and knowing your relative strengths and weaknesses as they relate to leadership become your personal leadership foundation. Training specific skill areas will polish your leadership abilities.

**Strengths and Limitations of the Trait Approach**

The evidence suggests that leaders possess different personal characteristics from those of non-leaders and a knowledge of the traits associated with leadership effectiveness helps in the selection of leaders. Similarly, an awareness of these characteristics can also point a person toward the right developmental experiences, such as learning to become more assertive. The current emphasis on emotional intelligence, which is really a group of traits and behaviours, reinforces the importance of the trait approach.

How do we answer the question ‘what makes a leader?’ Intelligence, training, an analytical mind and smart ideas are “threshold capabilities”, but emotional intelligence is a fundamental requirement for effective leadership. While technical skills and cognitive skills (IQ) are important, Emotional Intelligence (EQ) is twice as important. It has been claimed that at senior levels, 90% of the difference between a star performer and an average performer are attributed to EQ.

**Emotional Intelligence** comprises:

**Self-Awareness** is the ability to understand your moods, emotions and drives, as well as their effect on others. The hallmarks of self-awareness are self-confidence, having a capacity for realistic self-assessment and exhibiting a self-deprecating sense of humour. **Self-Regulation** is the ability to control or redirect disruptive impulses and moods, have a propensity to suspend judgment and to think before acting. The hallmarks of self-regulation are trustworthiness and integrity, being comfortable with ambiguity and having an openness to change.

**Motivation** is having a passion to work for reasons that go beyond money or status, as well as showing a propensity to pursue goals with energy and persistence. The hallmarks of motivation are a strong drive to achieve, being optimistic even in the face of failure and having organisational commitment.

**Empathy** is the ability to understand the emotional makeup of other people and the skill in treating people according to their emotional reactions. The hallmarks of empathy are having the expertise in building and retaining talent, showing cross-cultural sensitivity and providing service to clients and customers.

**Social Skill** is about proficiency in managing relationships, building networks and having an ability to find common ground and build rapport. The hallmarks of social skills is in the effectiveness in leading change, being persuasive, as well as exhibiting an expertise in building and leading teams. Although the process is not easy, emotional intelligence can be
learned. It takes time and commitment but the benefits of having well-developed emotional intelligence can be substantial.

Notwithstanding the above, the trait approach is limited because it does not specify which traits are absolutely needed in which leadership situations and how much of each trait is needed. It can also breed an elitist conception of leadership. Certain traits increase the probability of a person’s becoming an effective leader but the situation often influences which traits will be the most important.

**Summary**
The trait-based perspective of leadership asserts certain personality traits, leader motives and cognitive factors which contribute to leadership effectiveness. Personality traits include both general traits and task-related traits. Leaders can often be distinguished by their needs or motives. While there may be a few characteristics that many leaders hold in common, such as a desire to lead, the willingness to take risks and a need to achieve, these characteristics are not necessarily shared by all leaders. Learning to lead stretches back to childhood. Cognitive ability is important for leadership success. Traits, motives and cognitive ability derive from a combination of heredity and environment. Skills training will polish those leadership qualities a person already possesses. Traits appear to distinguish leaders from non-leaders and effective leaders from less-effective leaders. But as we have already discussed leadership is largely about the relationship between leaders and followers and a critical task is for leaders to build and maintain a solid relationship with others. Emotional intelligence distinguishes outstanding leaders and is linked to strong performance.