Holistic Leadership

A Systems Approach For Creating Excellent Leaders

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What Is Leadership Anyway?

Everyone seems to know what great leaders look like when they see them. But, one year’s success story often turns into the next year’s failure. So, why is it so hard to define and predict who will be a consistently successful leader? Unfortunately, the vast amount of leadership research has led to few clear conclusions. Some research has highlighted that there is often significant variation of successful types of performers in similar settings. In contrast, many of the factors that do discriminate leadership success are not consistently predictive of excellent performance. Why? In part, discrepancies stem from varying definitions and methods for exploring the topic. However, the primary reason is that leadership is the result of complex systems interactions, including:

- “Leader” characteristics;
- “Follower” characteristics;
- Environmental factors; and
- Situational demands evolving over time.

Both research and popular literature generally focus on selective parts of the overall system.

Sparse predictive data and the complexity of the subject have led some to conclude that there is no such thing as leadership. What appears to be great leadership is merely “false attribution” attached to a figurehead in a successful situation. Does this mean we should abandon hope for developing a realistic framework for understanding, assessing and developing excellent leaders?

The first problem in clarifying the nature of leadership is definitional. Unfortunately, even in the research literature, the definition of leader varies widely. For example, some of the most common questions related to exploring the nature of leadership include:

- Are leaders universally the named head of an organization?
- What is the difference between leadership and management?
- Are there leaders at all levels of an organization?
- Do followers play an important role in the leader’s success?
- Can leadership be imbedded in organizations, separate from an individual’s characteristics and behavior?
- Will leaders that succeed in some settings fail in others?
- Is leadership an innate set of skills or can it be developed?
- How do cultural, systems and organizational factors impact leaders and their effectiveness?
- Do day-to-day situational factors, demands and context play major roles in perceived and real leadership success?
Each of these questions and others will be explored in this article. However, to frame the overall discussion we define leadership as:

“The ability of individuals to motivate others to voluntarily follow through with commitments to reach a stated purpose or goal.”

What Really Makes Leaders Successful?

While leadership has proven to be a complex subject, various aspects of its essence surface consistently. For example, many formal research studies and most of the popular literature identify a relatively consistent set of attributes common to successful leaders at all levels within organizations (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Common Leadership Success Factors**

- Energize others around a common purpose or vision
- Model key values and desired behaviors
- Challenge the status quo and encourages change
- Focus the team on the right things to do
- Involve and enlist others to participate
- Build and mobilize a network of followers
- Generate intense personal loyalty and attachments from others
- Encourage, reinforce and influence others to perform and contribute
- Drive critical activities to completion

So, why doesn’t identifying or even developing individuals to exhibit these general characteristics produce consistently excellent leaders? These attributes (and other more specific competencies outlined later in the article) represent the “necessary, but not sufficient” properties of excellent leaders. In other words, if a significant number of these elements are lacking, an individual probably cannot succeed in many settings. However, even people very capable of performing all these actions may not succeed. So, what are the missing ingredients?

Other data gives us clues. Research provides strong evidence about the key elements beyond general personal attributes that contribute to leadership success (see Figure 2 for key findings).
Figure 2: Summary of Key Factors Required for Leadership Success

- Leadership behaviors must be consistently performed to build a foundation of trust required for meeting challenges and changing demands.
- Successful leaders rely on “conferred status or power” given voluntarily by followers.
- Leadership is a “social exchange” based on “perceived” fairness of followers around the costs and rewards of assuming differentiated roles to reach toward a particular outcome or goals.
- The main currency of leadership is influence through the development, accumulation, and mobilization of social power.
- Leadership energizes or stimulates the motives of followers to act in ways that mobilize individual and collective capabilities.
- Leadership in different situations requires significantly different stances, focus and behaviors.
- High impact leaders provide structured roles and goals, the path to fulfill both, and clarity about the expected payoff.
- Leaders who appropriately adapt their level of directiveness to the “readiness” of followers (e.g., “willingness” and “ability” to act) are more successful.
- Effective leaders maximize the availability of talent, best practices and expert knowledge throughout their organizations.
- Successful leaders champion and provide opportunities for individual and collective change.

Based on our own and others’ research, this article will present a structured model that encompasses the above factors into a practical framework that can be used to articulate standards, identify strengths and gaps, build capabilities, and support leadership development. The framework we propose to help drive leadership development is based on the following assumptions:

- Some common, basic determinants of effective leadership are well known.
- Leadership success requires responsiveness to situational demands.
- Leadership can be organized into key perspectives that support responsiveness to various situations or work contexts.

These assumptions are very important for simplifying the day-to-day practices and can be translated into the following five hierarchical perspectives that can be applied to both develop situational approaches to leadership and assess the leadership capabilities of individuals and whole teams:

- Organization level perspective;
- Process perspective;
- Task-person perspective;
- Competency perspective; and
- Systems perspective.
Each will be outlined in more detail below.
Leadership Perspectives

Organizational Level Perspective: Excellent Leaders Focus on the Right Level and Issues

Successful leaders are able to adapt their behavior to deal with issues at different organization levels. In smaller organizations, individual leaders must exhibit a wide range of behaviors shifting focus from strategy to operational issues; from processes to tactical actions. In larger organizations the requirements for level-specific capabilities actually divide into discrete leadership career band roles (see Figure 3). In practice, this means that the stance and behaviors that make a leader succeed at one level may produce failure at another. For example, executives must consistently exhibit characteristics that maintain focus on vision and strategy, that impact the entire workforce or large portions of it, and that encompass large-scale interventions spanning significant periods of time.

Figure 3: Changes in Work Context by Position Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Scope</th>
<th>Time Span</th>
<th>Scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive</td>
<td>Vision and Strategy Focus</td>
<td>Workforce Orientation</td>
<td>Long Time Span</td>
<td>Enterprise-Wide Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-Level Manager/Integrator</td>
<td>Process/Practice Focus</td>
<td>Multi-Team Orientation</td>
<td>Intermediate Time Span</td>
<td>Multi-Project Integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Leader/First-Level Manager</td>
<td>Goal Focus</td>
<td>Team Orientation</td>
<td>Short to Intermediate Time Span</td>
<td>Project/Product Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Contributor</td>
<td>Technical Focus</td>
<td>Self-Management Orientation</td>
<td>Short to Intermediate Time Span</td>
<td>Boundaried Tasks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Perspective: Excellent Leaders Develop and Implement Core Processes

The diverse needs of organizations can be encompassed in eight processes defining the key leadership interventions that occur at different organizational levels (see Figure 4). Some of these processes are more strategic in nature and are more predominant requirements for mid-level managers and executives. Mid-level managers concentrate primarily on processes that focus on operations and groups, but also still drive activities related to maximizing individual performance and reaching critical goals. Executives, in contrast, focus on processes related to vision, strategy, networking and resources, but still facilitate all
other processes through appropriate direction–setting, encouragement, coaching and delegation. Front-line supervisors primarily focus on group and individually-oriented processes. The critical leadership capability enabling any of these core processes entails the ability to implement the process from beginning to end. This means changing leadership behavior and stance through the following process phases or steps:

*Defining Purpose; Mobilizing Resources; Applying Practices; and Driving Outcomes.*

**Figure 4: Core Leadership Processes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization Level</th>
<th>Behavioral Focus</th>
<th>Leadership and Management Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whole Organization</td>
<td>Person</td>
<td>1. Creating a Compelling Vision for Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Executing a Competitive Strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operation</td>
<td>Person</td>
<td>3. Generating an Integrated Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4. Mobilizing and Managing Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>Person</td>
<td>5. Maximizing Team Effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6. Defining and Implementing Core Capabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Person</td>
<td>7. Leveraging Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8. Reaching Critical Goals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Task-Person Perspective: Excellent Leaders Balance Their Focus Between Tasks and People

As introduced in the previous section of the paper, half of the core leadership processes focus primarily on motivating, energizing and aligning people; half focus on operational or “task” issues. And while some experts confine their definition of leadership to “people” interventions and define “task” interventions as part of management, we advocate for the more integrated point of view that both represent key leadership elements. Furthermore, some of the most critical attributes of successful leaders include their ability to align, integrate and execute both the “soft” and “hard” aspects of an enterprise by balancing their focus between people and task issues.

Competency Perspective: Excellent Leaders Are Capable of Adapting Their Behavior to Situational Demands

Leadership competencies represent groups of behaviors organized around themes that distinguish excellent performers in organization settings. These factors enable individual leaders, their coaches and organizations to assess, track, and improve the identified behaviors required for success. In other words, leadership competencies define what excellent performers look like in action and each competency in a leadership framework provides a focused “to do” list that produces impact for targeted interventions.

Excellence depends on aligning behavioral responses to the shifting focus, scope, scale and complexity of organizational demands. The best performers apply competencies according to various dimensions such as:

- Strategic vs. tactical needs.
- Person vs. task demands.
- Demands related to opening vs. closing system boundaries.
- Efforts required for initiating vs. completing processes.

For example, a Visioning behavior such as: “Creates and consistently shares a vision or picture of the organization that motivates others to superior performance,” has the following characteristics:

- It is person-focused,
- It is intended to “close” ranks or point people in a particular direction,
- It is part of “initiating” or creating common purpose, and
- It is a high-level, strategic intervention.
In contrast, a Leadership behavior related to Results Orientation, such as: “Systematically identifies the key requirements of a task and differentiates between what is important and not important,” has distinctly different properties:

- It is task-focused,
- It is intended to deliver something to someone “outside” the boundary of a project or process,
- It is focused on “completing” an effort, and
- It is practical and tactical in its intent.

Both types of behaviors are critical for leadership success. However, their contrasting characteristics often make the decision to select one behavior to perform rather than another difficult. Therefore, developing individuals who can master individual competencies and apply them flexibly in various situations are both critical success factors.

Figure 5 outlines a complete range of competencies required to fulfill all five leadership perspectives.

For example, in executive roles, the most critical competencies include the eight sets of characteristics encompassed in the “strategic” domain. However, best executives ensure that all leadership competencies are performed consistently by enrolling other leaders to exhibit them and by selectively exhibiting them in the following situations:

- Where role modeling is required,
- When a specific situation requiring those competencies is their responsibility (e.g., goal-setting with direct reports), or
- When there are stresses or deficits in leadership at lower levels of the organization.
Systems Context Perspective: Excellent Leaders Adapt Behavior to Their Environment

The final leadership calibration step is perhaps the most important. Top performers do not just exhibit excellent behaviors matched to a static situation. Instead, they dynamically adapt the behaviors they exhibit to the changing environmental context. They shape their actions and interactions with others in response to individual, team, functional, organizational and cultural factors (See Figure 6). In many situations, these factors present conflicts and inconsistencies that excellent leaders can accommodate or even leverage. In some instances, however, environmental factors represent such significant conflicts that even superior levels of demonstrated leadership can fail to make a significant positive impact.

Therefore, it is important to understand that individual, even collective, leadership has limitations and that effective development programs must focus on creating an empowering environment with imbedded values, practices, opportunities for growth and culture to support continuous learning and growth of individuals.
How Does a Holistic Approach Help Leadership Development?

Structuring key characteristics into a framework comprised of levels and an accompanying set of core processes has some distinct advantages for assessing and developing leaders. For example, by assessing competencies, an individual, team, or even a whole organization can identify various kinds of gaps, including specific behavioral or competency weaknesses or perhaps more important, gaps related to:

- Deficits in one or more processes or levels of leadership,
- Vulnerabilities in particular steps within a process or
- Weaknesses in person or task skills.

By providing diagnostic information about various dimensions of leadership, the holistic framework can clarify major areas or themes requiring development. Furthermore, various dimensions of the system
can be used to identify job, role, or level (e.g., first level supervisor, mid-level manager, executive) requirements and then applied to determine:

- Role-person fit by the organization (as in a hiring, selection or succession planning process), or
- Role-person fit by an individual to seek assignments or facilitate career planning.

By communicating and supporting a consistent framework with formal learning, coaching and developmental experiences organizations can accelerate the acquisition of leadership competencies in individuals and groups.

No matter what use is targeted, a structured, holistic approach applying a range of perspectives captures a greater number of situational variables related to leadership than traditional perspectives.
About the Author

Dr. Stephen C. Schoonover is Vice President of Professional Services at Salary.com. He is a graduate of Harvard College and Harvard Medical School and was a board-certified practicing psychiatrist and Harvard Faculty member for more than 15 years. He taught in Harvard's department of psychology and currently teaches courses at Kellogg School of Management. Over the past 25 years, Dr. Schoonover has managed consulting firms specializing in executive coaching, developing leadership programs and installing competency programs with a range of Fortune 100 companies.

Dr. Schoonover and his associates use their extensive consulting experience in competency development, leadership and career development and performance management to help clients design and implement human asset management programs that produce high-performing, adaptive workforces and deliver superior results.

For the past 25 years, Dr. Schoonover has designed and implemented performance development systems and pioneered the development of a competency-based leadership framework. He has delivered successful competency consulting engagements for leading Fortune 100 companies such as GE, Lockheed Martin, HP, Oracle, EDS, Raytheon, Tyson Foods, Freddie Mac, PWC, Accenture, Ernst & Young, GAP, Merck, and Johnson & Johnson.

Dr. Schoonover is a renowned authority on competency-driven human capital management and has published several key studies, including Competency-Based HR Applications: Results of a Comprehensive Study in partnership with the Society for Human Resource Management and Arthur Andersen; a study for the Society for Human Resource Management on human resource competencies “Human Resource Competencies for the Year 2000: The Wake Up Call” published by SHRM and it’s companion piece Human Resource Competencies for the Year 2000: A Professional's Toolkit for Performance Development.

As of January 2008, Dr. Schoonover and the Schoonover associates team joined Salary.com to form the Human Capital Management (HCM) Consulting Practice.

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Leadership Development Services

Creating a leadership culture and methods for growing talent within an organization is a key focus for Salary.com’s HCM Consulting organization. These interventions can range from one-on-one coaching for executives to the design and implementation of an organization-wide leadership program involving identifying and developing a leadership pipeline, creating a leadership curriculum, and building a framework for accelerated on-the-job development.

Our leadership offerings include:

- Leadership Coaching – focusing on one-on-one advice and feedback for improving personal, team and organizational performance.
- Leadership Training – focusing on leadership best practices using a research-based leadership framework. Sessions range from half-day overview modules to complete courses involving a range of leadership topics.
- Leadership Program Development – focusing on the design and implementation of multi-dimensional programs, including a range of elements such as:
  - Talent pipelining
  - Hiring and selection
  - Curriculum development and rollout
  - Creation of organization learning capabilities (e.g., web portals, developmental assignments, on-the-job learning, etc.)
  - Integration with performance management and pay

In addition, we also deliver the following customizable, competency-based leadership curriculum organized into the following modules:

- Interpersonal Skills and Coaching
- Coaching Fundamentals
- Leading Your Team
- Managing Diversity
- Strategic Influence
- Cross-Team Integration
- Customer-Driven Organization
- Leading in a Complex Organization
- Organization Structuring
- Networking and Partnership
- Principles of Large Scale Change
- Performance Management
Competency Data & Services

Competency Data & Services offerings from Salary.com provide consistent criteria for enabling the integration and alignment of HR processes with your organization’s business goals. Our off-the-shelf competency models validated by respected organizations around the globe, or customized competency engagements, support and increase the effectiveness of your departmental or enterprise-wide workforce initiatives.

**Benefits**

- Identify key competencies that reinforce your organization’s goals and culture.
- Create integrated competency-based approaches for all HR applications, including:
  - Assessment
  - Selection
  - Development planning
  - Performance management
  - Succession planning
  - Learning and development
  - Career development
  - Pay-for-performance
- Align specific skills, knowledge and behavior to individual jobs or roles.
- Clarify performance and development standards for employees and managers.
- Outline specific competencies for technical and relationship/soft skills.
- Drive performance through specific and measurable variables.
- Increase retention through skills alignment and succession planning.
- Identify the highest-quality candidates through competency assessment.

**Featured offerings**

**Off-the-Shelf Competency Data Products**

- Corporate enterprise
- Insurance enterprise
- Banking enterprise
- Retail enterprise
- Manufacturing enterprise
- Information technology
- General leadership competency library
- Customer relationship management
- Healthcare administration
- Customization tool
- Competency management implementation guide
- Assessment tool

**Customized Services**

- Job competency model customization
- Competency data development
- Implementation process support
- Learning resource mapping
Competency model overview

- 68 Job families
- 900 Job profiles
- 1,200 Competencies
- 3,600 Learning references
- 25,000 Behavioral indicators

Competency model features

All competency models feature the following:

- Complete job profiles
- Position descriptions
- Key responsibilities
- Mapped learning references
- Job-specific competencies
- Behavioral-based proficiency descriptions
- Proficiency level recommendations

900 Jobs

Job description with job responsibilities

JOB PROFILES

1,200+ Competencies

Business
- 25 Competencies
- Level 1: Basic understanding
- Level 2: Working experience
- Level 3: Extensive experience
- Level 4: Subject matter depth and breadth

Interpersonal
- 24 Competencies

Management
- 21 Competencies

Technical
- 195 Competencies

Business Tools
- 22 Competencies

4 Levels of Proficiency with unique behavioral descriptors for each level

Types of competencies

Business
- General business knowledge and skills.

Individual
- Knowledge, abilities and behaviors that result in an individual’s personal effectiveness and effective interactions with others.

Function
- Technical skills and abilities associated with particular job competencies.

Core
- General competencies that have been defined for everyone in the organization.

Leadership
- Competencies specific to executive and leadership roles.

Management
- Competencies specific to management or supervisory roles that are generally more task oriented than leadership competencies.

3,600+ Learning References

- Activities: External Publications
- Audiotapes: External References
- Books: Training Programs
- Conferences: Universities
- Government Resources: Videos
- Internal Resources: Vendors
- Organizations: World Wide Web

The leader in competency-driven human capital management consulting
Contact Information

To learn more about Salary.com Data, Software & Services, or to schedule a demonstration:

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