Personality, Leadership Skills and Performance: What does it take to be a Star Performer?

Personality, Leadership Traits & Performance

Effective leadership is becoming increasing important for organizations that need to develop the motivation and commitment of their employees. Leadership is no longer restricted to a few at the top. Increasingly, businesses are striving to achieve Distributed Leadership, so managers develop the skills that enable them to get the best from their people. However, we still have the big debate around the question, "Can leadership be developed?" Is it something you can learn, or is it an innate characteristic linked to personality traits?

Despite extensive debate going back many years concerning the nature of personality, there is still some uncertainty about key factors, particularly when we try to define leadership traits. Is there a clear link between personality and an effective leadership style? How important is the drive to succeed? This article explores some of the important issues.

The early research on Personality, most notably studies by Cattell, emphasised the importance of what he referred to as *Source Traits*. Subsequent research e.g. Digman (1990) focused on broader, underlying dimensions of personality. A general consensus has now emerged that suggests that the basic structure of personality can be described in terms of five superordinate factors. These are widely referred to as the *Big Five.* The factors include extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotionality, and intellect or "openness to experience", as defined by McCrae & Costa (1987), and Peabody and Goldberg (1989).

However, the exact nature of each dimension is far from clear. The first factor, for example, is usually called Extraversion, but as McCrae and Costa (1987) point out, there is potentially a good deal of variability in what it comprises. The main focus may be assertiveness and an open expression of impulses. Alternatively, it may be characterised by dominance and confident assurance. It is also apparent that sociability is not always strongly represented. Perhaps not surprisingly, some people have concerns about the relevance of personality tests. How much added-value do they offer in the context of work-based assessment? This is of particular interest when we seek to understand Leadership Style and Leadership Performance.

It is evident that trait-based questionnaires provide fairly consistent and reliable measures of personality, but the correlation with observed work behaviour is low and rarely exceeds 0.30. This prompted Blinkhorn and Johnson (1990) to observe that there is little evidence that even the best personality tests predict job performance. An alternative perspective would be to recognise that trait-based measures provide some explanation of work behaviour, when related to specific criteria. For example, Leadership Traits relating to personal conviction, charisma and imagination ('vision') have been linked to Transformational Leadership. This type of insight may be of value in a selection situation. However, they do not explore the interaction between the individual and their work environment or explain the underlying processes that contribute to different styles of leadership.

Trait-based models of personality provide only a partial explanation of behaviour at work. They do not examine needs, motives, or context, or how these are likely to shape an individual's response in a particular type of situation. In many ways these needs and motives can be viewed as the "drivers", that are then reflected in the trait-based profile, and their impact can be significant.

Profiling High Performance at Work

An important study completed by Kelly and Caplan (1993) of Bell Labs engineers found that high performers were not identified by ability or personality traits. This may, in part, be a consequence of objective selection procedures, possibly reinforced by a process of self-selection. This would tend to reduce significant differences between employees on these dimensions. However, it can also be argued that personality traits are not the best start point when profiling high performance. They assess broad underlying characteristics but miss the more 'fine-grained' issues affecting motivation and performance. In the case of Bell Labs, those individuals who were more effective did display distinctive patterns of work behaviour, reflecting the way they perceived their role and prioritised activities. However, these differences were not explained by personality traits or IQ. To profile these attributes requires a dynamic model of performance.

Following the initial research at the Bell Labs a training programme was developed, known as the Productivity Enhancement Group. The training sessions were run by respected engineers and included work-related exercises, case studies and frank discussion. Substantial productivity improvements were reported after this intervention, moving the 'average' performers closer to the 'stars'.

Although they are not explained by trait-based models, the patterns of response linked to superior performance can be viewed in terms of the interaction between individual needs and situational context. Understanding the dynamics of this process should, therefore, be of significant interest in selection, and a key element in the design of effective training and development programmes. Additional support for this model of work behaviour can be found in the work of Douglas Bray who pioneered Assessment Centres at AT&T, and Dr. Ann Howard, whose book "Managerial Lives in Transition" was a summary of thirty years of research. Needs and motivation are clearly linked to performance, with adjustment to work demands being characterised as a process of interaction.

Amongst the key findings of the Bray/Howard study, it was evident that *"the higher-potential managers gave more desirable ratings to work that involved a lot of responsibility, required more initiative, was dependent on their decisions, and required practical intelligence and quick decisions". (p 358)* The leadership theories and insights into motivational processes highlighted by this research draw strongly on personality theory first outlined by Henry Murray and the research team at Harvard in the late 1930s.

Murray (1938) developed a list of needs that contribute to patterns of behaviour (called 'thema') arising in response to environmental stimuli. Considerable attention has been given to the need for achievement, power, and affiliation as possible determinants of job-person fit, and it has been shown that needs predict job satisfaction and competency (e.g. McClelland, 1985). There are clear links with the motivational drivers that underpin leadership traits. The way an individual adapts to the work environment can, therefore, be viewed in terms of underlying needs and motivation, which are then reflected in the individual's preference for different areas of activity, and different ways of responding to situations. For managers, this can directly affect their leadership skills.

"The motivational approach to personality assumes that behaviour is a reflection of a set of underlying needs. As a need becomes more intense, it becomes more likely to influence what behaviour is done. Behaviour is also influenced by environmental press - external stimuli that elicit motivational tendencies." (Carver and Scheier (p 128).

Needs, Motivation & Leadership Style

A significant amount of research has been focused on the **need for achievement**, particularly as it relates to performance in organisational settings. Need for Achievement (abbreviated "*n* Ach") is defined as *"behaviour toward competition with a standard of excellence"* (McClelland et al., 1953). People high on *n* Ach seek occupational goals that are challenging but realistic, and provide feedback on their abilities (Trope, 1975, 1980). People who are low on *n* Ach prefer tasks that are either very easy or very difficult (so that poor performance is readily explained and does not reflect badly on the individual). Leadership theories generally recognise that nAch figures strongly in leadership personality and contributes to such qualities as drive, conviction and sense of purpose .

It has been shown that *n* Ach is positively related to persistence in the face of failure, and this may be explained, at least in part, by the desire to avoid failure. This also highlights the point that any given behaviour can be based on either an *approach motive* or an *avoidance motive* (or some combination of the two). This could be significant if, for example, it is important to understand how someone is likely to respond to a particular situation when under pressure arising from specific variables which might, for example, include peer disapproval, a reduced sense of personal autonomy, or a loss of direct control.

Another motive that has been the subject of extensive study is the **need for power**. This is also viewed as one of the significant, underlying leadership traits. It is reflected in the motive to have an impact on others and is evident in seeking prestige, position, and influence. Need for power is similar to what Murray calls the **dominance motive**. It has been shown that people high on *n* Power have a more active, assertive and controlling orientation in their interactions with others (McAdams et al., 1984). A study by Fodor (1984) also demonstrated that people high on *n* Power reported becoming more aroused or activated when supervising a work group that was performing poorly. Winter and Barenbaum (1985) found considerable support for the view that a distinction could be made between the responsible, "conscientious" pursuit of prestige, and "profligate, impulsive" power, which was positively related to drinking, fighting, and sexual possessiveness.

Figure 1 Important Personality Attributes that Impact on Leadership Performance

Also important in developing a more detailed understanding of behaviour in an organisational context is **need for affiliation**. This involves actively establishing and maintaining social relationships, and reflects concern over acceptance by others. This need to be liked can contribute to more active participation in social events, and higher ratings as group leaders (Sorrentino and Field, 1986), particularly when linked with high *n* Ach. (The leadership ratings were based on the extent to which the individual was named by other group members).

The combination of different levels of need in the areas of Achievement, Power and Affiliation will directly influence styles of leadership and impact on overall leadership performance.

It is also evident from research by Hill (1987) that there is value in making a distinction between four different affiliation needs: social comparison, emotional support, positive stimulation, and attention from others. It was found that an individual's behaviour in a specific situation was best predicted by the relevant scale. Other research (e.g. McAdams 1989) has focused on the **need for intimacy**. This involves a desire to experience warm, close, and communicative exchange with another person. *It goes beyond need for affiliation in emphasising the positive, affirmative aspects of close relationships, reflected in openness (self-disclosure), eye contact, and listening to others.* A lack of intimacy may undermine empathy and contribute to a transactional leadership style, or at worst combine with a high need for personal power and low affiliation. These are attributes associated with the autocratic leader.

Whilst high need for intimacy has been shown to correlate with job satisfaction, it creates tension and poor adjustment if combined with a high need for power (Zeldow, Dauherty, & McAdams, 1988). This can be contrasted with the combination of a high need for power, low need for affiliation, and a tendency to inhibit the expression of power, which is associated with managerial success (McClelland & Boyatzis, 1982). This is known as the *"inhibited power motive"* and is associated with more effective styles of leadership. It can be contrasted with autocratic leadership that is characterized by the raw expression of personal power, with little regard for others.

It is clear that from a motivational point of view, personality must be a system of multiple needs, as Murray argued. However, people are selective in the way they meet these needs and their response to various types of situation. Different situations have different *incentive values* for different people, even if they are fulfilling the same need. Behaviour should also be viewed in terms of people's *expectancy* about the outcomes and their ability to complete the task.

The expectancy model of personality, developed by Porter and Lawler (1968), captures these variables and also includes *role perceptions* as a key factor moderating performance. Specific aspects of the job and organisational context will cue motivational preferences, with the result that a latent need will become manifest and reflected in a particular pattern of work behaviour.

Leadership Performance, Self Review & Self Image

Carver and Scheier reaffirm the point made earlier that there is a "growing body of opinion holding that the fundamental traits of personality can be largely subsumed within the framework of five supertraits." (p 123). They then ask whether this framework can also absorb the personality qualities which Murray regarded as important. Research by Costa and McCrae (1988a) suggested some degree of overlap, but also found that motives influence (or are influenced by) several traits instead of one. Dominance, for example, was related to extraversion, openness, and (inversely) agreeableness. It appears that the 5-factor model does not perfectly absorb the types of needs derived from Murray's model of personality.

Figure 2 Profiling Leadership Behaviour
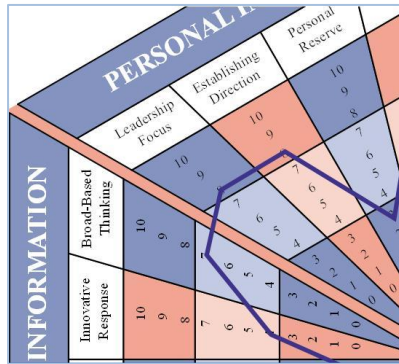
A study by Sharpley (1996) based on the Pario Professional questionnaire, which profiles personal needs and response to role-demands, demonstrated that the results related to a combination of traits, including extraversion, independence, and control. In addition, aspects of cognitive style were also relevant, indicating different types of work adjustment.

The Pario Profiling focuses directly on important aspects of work behaviour, rather than more general personality traits making it particularly suitable for coaching & development.

In the context of stress-health studies, Cooper and Payne (1991) make the point that although socio-demographic variables, personality traits, and health-related behaviours are reasonably well represented, there has been far less consideration of individual differences based on skills and abilities, and needs and motives. They mention that the extremely active research area on social support and health has "very little in it which would represent specifically relevant individual-difference variables such as need for emotional support, preferences for types of support, tolerance for social isolation, beliefs about reciprocity of social support, and so on.." (p 281). However, these would appear to be significant factors influencing role perceptions, work adjustment, and resulting patterns of work behaviour.

The expectancy theory model provides insight into the amount of effort/energy an individual will expend, and the manner in which they go about performing their work. *However, it is emphasised that this applies only to behaviours that are under the voluntary control of the individual.* It fits well with the theory of latent and manifest needs. What is significant in an organisational context is that so much professional and managerial behaviour is discretionary. Effective performance is closely linked to the way an individual perceives the role and the type of work strategies which are adopted. This is a dynamic process, especially when viewed alongside rapidly changing role demands, and is not readily explained simply by referring to personality traits. A new *Motivational Pathway* model has been highlighted by Pario Innovations, based on the principles of Self Determination Theory.
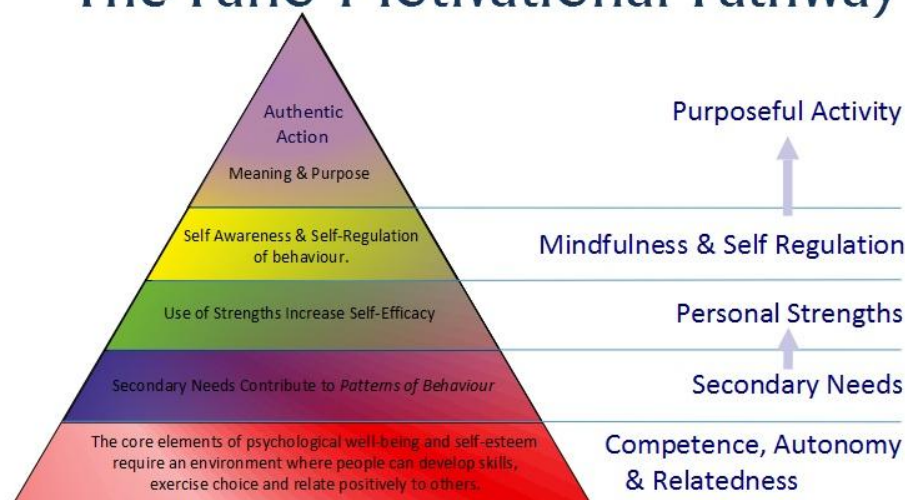
Drawing on Self Determination Theory and Positive Psychology, the Pario Hierarchy of Needs highlights essential steps linked to Positive Use of Strengths and development of Self-Esteem. Purposeful Activity creates Meaning and is valued by others.

http://www.pario-innovations.com/motivation_theory_hierarchy_of_needs.html

An important finding emerging from research studies (e.g. McClelland et al., 1972, Winter, 1988), is that people are often unaware of the motives that underlie dysfunctional aspects of their behaviour. In the context of work performance this may mean that problem behaviours, or *less effective work patterns*, reflect needs that are being poorly channelled or expressed. In order to identify the source of the problem there is benefit in reviewing both role demands and the person's personal objectives or motives. This approach can be contrasted with trait-based models that argue that problems are fixed or anchored within the individual. Self awareness through feedback is vital, and 360 degree feedback is particularly useful in making explicit the expectations of others. This helps clarify the type of behaviour that contributes to effective leadership performance.

McClelland and Winter (1969) developed a training programme to raise people's awareness of achievement motivation. This self review involved teaching people to use achievement imagery, link these thoughts to specific concrete action patterns, and then consider whether this achievement orientation was compatible with his or her self-image. A two-year follow-up study indicated that participants had higher business-achievement ratings, were more likely to have started new business ventures, and were more likely to be employing more people than before, as compared to control subjects. A similar process is evident in more recent developments in Positive Psychology, with the emphasis on the application of personal strengths in new situations. This contributes to a sense of purpose (through meaningful activity) and supports development of psychological well-being.

Whilst measures of personality traits are of value in determining certain *threshold competencies*, and factors which are clearly dysfunctional in the context of particular job demands, there is less evidence to show that they identify the *differentiating competencies* associated with the leadership skills and *patterns of behaviour* contributing high performance. The need for power, for example, is clearly linked to managerial effectiveness. However, as Winter (1988) has shown, it is important to understand the precise nature of the power motive. If power is focused in an inappropriate way it can be very damaging, both to staff commitment and organisational performance, but this often only becomes evident well after someone has been appointed to a key position.

360 Degree Leadership

Clearly defined performance criteria coupled with more innovative assessment methods, including use of Intelligent 360 degree feedback software, which allows specific questions to be directed to different groups of respondent, will help increase understanding of key aspects of work behaviour. This is an area of increasing relevance for organisations that are concerned about the effective selection and development of staff, and seeking to create the enabling culture required to support their longer-term success.

Although certain 'leadership traits' are important and contribute to effective performance, the really important feature of leadership relates to management of role relationships. This is a role-based perspective and is illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3:   Identifying and Managing Role Relationships
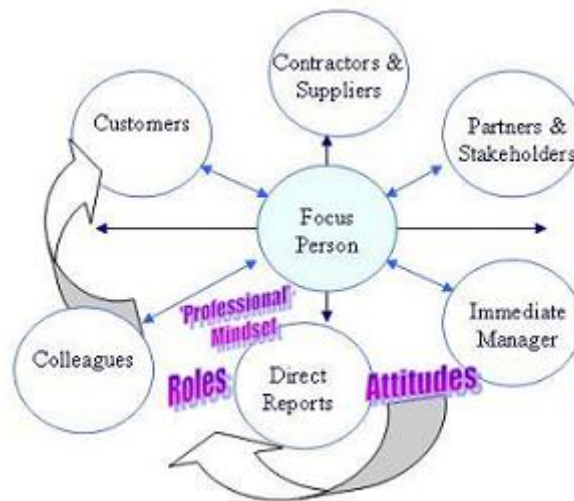
Effectiveness involves understanding the expectations of different groups and the action required to achieve positive outcomes aligned to organizational goals. Training managers to develop relevant leadership skills plays a big part in raising standards, notably in encouraging the discretionary effort and commitment of team members. Sometimes it takes a well-designed employee survey to profile levels of employee motivation and identify how best to move forward. In some cases, a totally new Leadership Development and Succession Planning (Talent Management) Process may be the answer.

We should also remember that there is a big difference between Performance and Potential. A study by the Corporate Leadership Council (2005) found that 71% of high-performers were not high-potentials. This was because they lacked the ability, motivation or engagement for the next level. Key attributes of talented people include *Learning Agility* and the ability to achieve *Balanced Processing of information,* so they take account of as many relevant issues as possible. 360 degree feedback is a vital element in promoting this type of thinking.

Clearly, alternatives to trait-based explanations of work behaviour are necessary to find and develop the Star Performers. Central to the process of developing capability and unlocking potential is the issue of 'Mindset'. The Motivational Pathway highlights essential steps in the process of harnessing strengths through engagement in meaningful activity. However, the process of creating alignment of individual activities with organizational goals requires *Purposeful Conversations* that help build commitment and encourage Discretionary Effort. This process involves *Leading with AIMS* and is discussed in a separate article.

Discover how your organization can identify and develop Star Performers...

http://www.pario-innovations.com

Additional Articles:

http://ezinearticles.com/?expert=David_Sharpley

References:

Blinkhorn, J. & Johnson, C. (1990). The Insignificance of Personality Testing. Nature, Vol 348, 20-27 Dec 1990.

Cooper, C. & Payne, R. (1991). Personality and Stress: Individual differences in the stress process. Wiley

Costa, P. T., Jr., & McCrae, R. R. (1988a). From catalog to classification: Murray's needs and the five factor model. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 55, 258-265.

Fodor, E. M. (1984). The power motive and reactivity to power stresses. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 47, 853-859.

Hill, C. A. (1987). Affiliation motivation: People who need people... but in different ways. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 52, 1008-1018.

Kelley, R. and Caplan, J. (1993), How Bell Labs Creates Star Performers. Harvard Business Review, Vol 71, (4).

McAdams, D. P., Healy, S., & Krause, S., (1984). Social motives and patterns of friendships. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 47, 828-838.

McAdams, D. P., 1982, Experiences of intimacy and power: Relationships between social motives and auto-biographical memory. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 42, 292-302.

McAdams, D. P., (1985). Power, intimacy, and the life story. Personological inquiries in to identity. New York: Guilford Press.

McAdams, D. P., (1989). Intimacy: the need to be close. New York,: Doubleday.

McClelland, D. C., Atkinson, J. W., Clark, R. A., Lowell, E. I., (1953). The achievement motive. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

McClelland, D. C., Koestner, R., & Weinberger, E (Eds). (1972). The drinking man. New York: Free Press.

McClelland, D. C. & Boyatzis, R. E. (1982). Leadership motive pattern and long-term success in management. Journal of Applied Psychology, 67, 737-743.

McClelland, D. C. and Winter, D. G. (1969). Motivating economic achievement. New York: Free Press.

Murphy, K. and Davidshofer, C. (1994), Psychological Testing, Prentice Hall.

Porter, L. W. & Lawler, E. E. (1968), Managerial Attitudes and Performance, Irwin.

Sharpley, D. A. (1996). The Pario Professional Questionnaire – Users Manual: A new perspective on personality and performance. Pario Innovations Ltd

Sorrentino, R. M. & Field, N. (1986). Emergent leadership over time: The functional value of positive motivation. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 50, 1091-1099.

Trope, Y. (1975). Seeking information about one's own ability as a determinant of choice among tasks. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 32, 1004-1013.

Trope, Y. (1980). Self-assessment, self-enhancement, and task preference. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 16, 116-129.

Winter, D. G., & Barenbaum, N. B. (1985). Responsibility and the power motive in men and women. Journal of Personality, 53, 335-355.

Winter, D. G. (1988). The power motive in women-and men. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 54, 510-519.

Zeldow, P. W., Dauherty, S. R., & McAdams, D. P. (1988). Intimacy, power, and psychological well-being in medical students. The Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases, 176, 182-187.