



MODESTY IN LEADERSHIP: A STUDY OF THE LEVEL FIVE LEADER

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Human resource metrics and in particular, the management practices that impact bottom-line performance, have received increasing interest in recent years in the business community, as companies look to human capital rather than industrial capital to achieve success. A study that has garnered a great deal of attention in this area is the subject of Jim Collins' best-selling book *Good to Great* (2001). In it, Collins reports on the findings of his research team in their analysis of companies who significantly out-performed their competitors over an extended period of time. The research team examined companies who had a 15-year cumulative stock return at or below the general stock market and then cumulative returns that were at least three times the market over the next 15 years. The researchers further stipulated that the firms had to perform exceptionally regardless of the performance of their industry. Of 1,435 companies studied, only 11 met their criteria. Although Collins specifically tried to avoid having his team examine the leadership style of the CEOs, the researchers persuaded him that a common leadership style was shared by the leaders of all 11 companies and should not be ignored. This leadership style which Collins eventually termed the "Level Five leader" was characterized primarily by two things: modesty and an overwhelming sense of commitment to the organization above self. Collins admits in *Good to Great* that this finding did not fit the preconceptions of the research team.



Described as “more Lincoln or Socrates than Patton or Caesar” (Collins, 2001, p. 3), these CEOs were, according to the researchers, quiet, humble, shy, modest, and so forth. One individual is quoted as saying, “I never stopped trying to become qualified for the job” (Collins, 2001, p. 20). They were people with a “quiet, dogged nature” who conveyed an “awkward shyness and lack of pretense [which] was coupled with a fierce, even stoic, resolve” (Collins, 2001, p. 18). The researchers were clearly quite impressed by these people, as Collins states, “They have become models for us, something worthy to aspire toward” (Collins, 2001, p. 38).

Modesty or humility has received very little attention by researchers as a characteristic of leaders. In a meta-analysis of studies of leadership, there was not one mention of modesty cited in any study (Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002). A later study noted that modesty was not a typical characteristic of charismatic leaders (Bono & Judge, 2004) and a database search for articles using “modesty” or “humility” plus “leadership” turned up very little. One notable exception is Badaracco (2003, 2002) who coins the term “quiet leaders” to describe a person “whose modesty and restraint are in large measure responsible for their success” (Badaracco, 2003; Badaracco, 2002). Certainly modesty is not a typical criterion when selecting for leaders. The fact that these highly successful firms were all led by people that were modest inspired this research.

BACKGROUND

Why has modesty not emerged as a characteristic of leaders? There are many reasons for this. However, perhaps part of the issue may reside with the research focus on charisma and the traits of emergent leaders versus effective leaders. Over 400 studies on the topic of charisma were identified in a search in the PSYCHINFO database. Typical behaviors associated with charismatic leaders are “using inspirational language and delivery style and [they] must engage in exemplary acts involving risk and sacrifice” (Kanungo, 1998). In a well-known study of U.S. presidents, descriptors of charisma were: “finds dealing with the press enjoyable,”



“enjoys the ceremonial aspects of the position,” “is charismatic,” and “is seen as a world figure” (House, Spangler, & Woycke, 1991, p. 378). It is easy to see how modesty and charisma would appear to be incompatible qualities. Charismatic leaders appear very heroic and were especially appealing during the turnaround specialist era; their propensity for high drama captured the public’s attention.

Traits such as dominance, capacity for status, sociability, social presence, and self-confidence have all been correlated with ratings for emergent leaders (Hogan, Curphy, & Hogan, 1994; Judge et al., 2002). Modesty and kindness, however, have had mixed results as traits for emergent leaders (Bono & Judge, 2004). This emphasis on heroic traits encourages a mythology about what a leader should “look like” that is based on implicit leadership theory rather than data (Hogan et al., 1994). Search committees, who generally make selections for CEOs, are quite likely to be subject to this bias. Consequently, we may be perpetuating a particular leadership style that appears heroic while undervaluing a quieter style that doesn’t draw attention to itself.

There has been less research on effective leaders, although psychologists agree this is a very important topic (Hogan et al., 1994). The difficulty has been to isolate such things as situational factors over which the leader has no control from the leaders themselves (Kanungo, 1998). Traits that have been linked to leader effectiveness are: desire for advancement, energy, confidence, decisiveness, emotional stability, and conscientiousness (Hogan et al., 1994). However, many of these studies have been conducted in a laboratory setting, and Collins’ research is arguably one of the few studies to link business results with personality characteristics of effective leaders.

It is important to state here that the researchers of this study are not saying that the Level Five leader is the only type of effective leadership style. However, research does indicate that the opposite of modesty—narcissism—is often a key derailer for managers. And narcissistic leaders are often seen as charismatic (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005; Tourigny,



Dougan, Washbush, & Clements, 2003). Arrogance, untrustworthiness, overambitiousness, and aloofness have been found to be common derailers (Hogan et al., 1994; Kanungo, 1998), but people with these characteristics often interview well and impress their supervisors.

Large, bureaucratic organizations which emphasize status and impression management are particularly vulnerable to these characteristics; the hiring process searches for the very characteristics that may contribute to those executives' ultimate failure (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005).

However, to characterize the Level Five leader as only modest would be inaccurate. These leaders are also individuals with a high degree of commitment to goals and a willingness to put the organization ahead of their personal interests. They take personal responsibility when things fail and are quick to credit others when things go well. As the researchers of this study considered what this meant, it seemed to imply that these leaders were conscientious people of good character and that there were underlying values that drove their behavior. Behaving consistently with one's values is a definition of integrity. It is interesting to note that Badaracco's book grew out of a course in moral leadership. And although the idea of leaders guided by a sense of internal principles is not new (Covey, 1990), again, it is not something that is given a high priority in the selection process. We are much more attuned to competencies than to character.

Research shows, however, that integrity is extremely important in gaining the support and trust of others. It may be, in fact, the most important factor in leadership effectiveness (Covey, 2004; Hogan et al., 1994; Hogan & Kaiser, 2005; Judge et al., 2002; Kanungo, 1998; Kouzes & Posner, 1987). As one author states, quoting Socrates, "the first key to greatness is to be in reality what one appears to be" (Maxwell, 1993, p. 36).

The closest theoretical orientation to the Level Five leader seems to be the servant-leader concept developed by Robert Greenleaf (Greenleaf, 1991). Both concepts are outwardly focused rather than self-focused. Greenleaf said, "The great leader is servant first," and that the leader's first duty is to the employees. He stated that asking the question "Do those



served grow as people?” is a means of assessing whether someone is a servant-leader (Greenleaf, 1991, p. 7). Collins’ Level Five leader is also outwardly focused, although he frames it as a focus on the organization rather than specifically on the employees. However, Collins also states that the Level Five leader is concerned with succession and the development of people. This seems very similar to Greenleaf’s concept. Both Greenleaf and Collins mention Abraham Lincoln as a prototype for a leader that fits their respective concepts. Collins, in fact, says he considered calling the people in his study servant-leaders but rejected the idea because it seemed too soft. In addition, Collins suggested that Greenleaf’s concept did not include the commitment aspect (Collins, 2001). However, Greenleaf clearly states that the servant-leader is empathetic without sacrificing standards. He also notes that the servant-leader “elicits trust through competence. . . and values and a sustaining spirit . . . that will support the tenacious pursuit of a goal” (Greenleaf, 1991, p. 9). This certainly seems to indicate that commitment to high performance is important to the servant-leader. The difficulty with Greenleaf’s concept is that the servant-leader is, by his own admission, an intuitive concept based on his years assessing leaders at Bell Labs, and has not received analysis regarding its correlation with business performance. Perhaps that is why Collins’ book has created such fervor in the business community, while Greenleaf’s ideas are arguably still not in the mainstream of corporate America practices.

For the purposes of comparison, the researchers have listed the attributes of each type of leader, based on a careful reading of Greenleaf and Collins.



Greenleaf	Collins
Psychological self-insight, accurate self appraisal	Modesty—credits others for success, accepts responsibilities for failures
Strong initiative	Fanatically driven to produce results
Inspirational goal-setting	Inspired standards
Long-term sustained enthusiasm and commitment	Workmanlike diligence
Deep listening	Engage in debate and dialogue “truth is heard” culture
Courageous	Determined pursuit of “best in world” strategies
Detached problem-solving	Engage in debate and dialogue Questioning style, “truth is heard” culture
Other-centered communication	
Withdraws and reflects	
Accepting and empathetic	
Highly intuitive	Inferred from business results, hedgehog concept
High work standards	Inspired standards
Good judgment	Inferred from business results, hedgehog concept
Prescient regarding future events	Long-term perspective
Heightened awareness	Realistic confidence
Influences through gentle persuasion (questioning) and example	Questioning style
Motivations: 1) use talents for benefit of the common good, 2) shared wholeness, 3) growing people	Motivations: achieving long-term business success, using talents to benefit company
Love in community, demonstrated through unlimited liability for each other	“love affair” on team, friends for life
Reference to Jesus as a servant-leader	May be spiritual, select for character – rigorous process
First priority is build a group of people who become healthier, stronger and more autonomous	People first, strategy second; set up successors for the future
	Balance in lives
	Genius for simplicity
	Quiet, calm nature
	Focused, disciplined culture



As one can see from the chart, there appears to be quite a bit of overlap. In fact, only three attributes of the servant-leader and four of the Level Five leader are unique to one type or the other. An important distinction might be made around communicating to be understood and acceptance and empathy displayed by the servant-leader. These qualities suggest someone with high emotional intelligence. The servant-leader concept has been expanded over the years, and more recent interpretations include using encouragement and affirmation, building strong personal relationships, working collaboratively, valuing others' differences, sharing power, and releasing control (Laub, 2005); humility and emotional intelligence (Dierendonck & Heeren, 2006); and willingness to teach and delegate (Russell & Stone as cited in Rennaker, 2006). As the concept has matured, it appears that the aspects of Greenleaf's original concept that relate to interpersonal capabilities have received most of the attention and have become deeper and richer—perhaps because this aspect of the concept is particularly appealing and found to be lacking in many leaders.

Interpersonal capabilities are largely ignored by Collins. He does describe the cultures of the 11 companies as characterized by love, deep friendships, and respectful dialogue. Greenleaf refers to communities characterized by love, and a more recent article asserts that servant-leaders create “cultures of trust” that validate and empower people rather than demeaning or alienating them (Fawell, 2006, p. 407).

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to better understand a leadership style shown to be effective in achieving business results and raise an awareness of alternative leadership characteristics that CEOs and managers may find beneficial for their organizations. As previously discussed, much leadership research has been conducted in laboratory settings. Because this leadership style struck the researchers as complex, involving multiple dimensions, a structured study focused on a few attributes seemed limiting. More importantly, the researchers were interested in understanding at a



deep level the participants and how they came to be the people they were, a goal better suited to a collective case study (Stake, 2005, pp. 445-446). A case study in the form of naturalistic inquiry lends itself well to understanding complex phenomena and provides the researchers with vivid, rich, and dense descriptions in the natural language of the phenomena being studied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Eisner, 1991; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Polkinghorne, 2005).

The researchers were initially drawn to an innovative study of master therapists (Skovholt & Jennings, 2004) that used a case study approach. This led to Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR), an approach to understanding a small group of cases at a deep level. CQR has been used in the field of Counseling Psychology to understand therapists and those seeking counseling (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). CQR is closely linked to grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This strategy allows the data to emerge through a discovery process without preconceptions, yet “has a positivist concern for a systematic set of procedures” (Babbie, 2007, p. 296). Because the researchers hoped to find specific behaviors linked to typical managerial competencies, the idea that grounded theory is focused on understanding a “complex network of related constructs around a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2003, p. 15) seemed particularly apropos to the study. Knowing that they would be analyzing, organizing, and categorizing a significant amount of data, grounded theory offered both the structure and the flexibility desired by the researchers. Grounded theory also lends itself well to the incorporation of quantitative information (Babbie, 2007), something that was considered important to this study. However, it should be noted that the research evolved and was a blend of CQR and grounded theory protocols. More on this topic will be discussed later in this paper.

The researchers also felt it was important to study the participants in their context. By understanding the cultures in which these individuals flourish, one might be able to both determine the likely fit of a Level Five job candidate to a particular organization and identify those cultural elements that might be helpful in attracting these types of people. This is



similar to the concept of transferability as identified by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Context seemed particularly important to this research because this type of leader is not usually seen as fitting the prevailing leadership image, and it seemed likely that the cultures that support this type of leader would be atypical as well. To summarize, the study can be seen as interpretative, incorporating both ethnographic and phenomenological elements into primarily a grounded theory orientation using a cross-case analysis.

A mixed-methods approach using concurrent procedures, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative elements, was chosen. Interviewing, a method commonly used in naturalistic inquiry, provided the main source of information. A strength of the interview process is that it facilitates the expression of various points of views and opinions; additionally, respondents are free to expound upon them as they see fit (Weller & Romney, 1988; Yin, 2003). Another advantage of interviewing is that it allows the researchers the freedom to clarify ambiguous responses or pursue a particular train of thought. Psychological instruments intended for selection purposes were also incorporated; observations and documents also provided helpful information.

Triangulation is important in naturalistic research, as it enhances the trustworthiness of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and was an important part of this study's methodology. Interviews were conducted with both leaders and their direct reports. The leader-participants also took two personality instruments. Several of them provided additional unsolicited information, such as emails, videos or annual reports, to help the researchers. TDIndustries provided information on their performance management plan and graciously invited one of the researchers to attend an introductory supervisory course to better understand how they operationalize servant-leadership. Openness and an earnest interest on both sides characterized this experience. While they do not seek the limelight, the participants saw the value of bringing more understanding and attention to this leadership style, and were willing and equal colleagues in the research process. By gathering information from multiple sources, the researchers were able to



draw “convergent conclusions from divergent data” beyond what the more typical qualitative study might reveal (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).

Selection of Participants

Participants were selected through a peer nomination process. A paragraph describing the leadership construct was written and offered to interested colleagues. The construct was based largely on the Level Five leader. However, because two important elements of leadership—creating a vision and inspiring others to follow them—were not mentioned in Collins’ work, concepts from Greenleaf’s work were also included.

The Quiet Leader Construct

The Quiet Leader has a strong sense of commitment to the long-term success of the organization and never wavers from this. He or she works hard and sets high standards for performance by self and others. The QL does not tolerate mediocrity in any form, yet will attribute bad results to self and good results to others. The QL has strategic thinking ability and sets a vision for the company based on strong intuition and foresight—is able to think globally and grasp the implications of current actions at some later time. He or she has a modest nature, is quick to give credit to others and rarely credits self. He or she inspires trust through integrity and competence and is therefore, able to persuade others to follow him/her. The QL is motivated to make the company the best it can be, not by personal ambition, and pursues this with quiet, calm determination. Rather than grand gestures, the QL moves in steady and consistent manner toward the goal. Because of his/her commitment and modesty, the QL is seen as a “plow horse not a show horse.” (Collins, 2001, p. 33)

When an individual was identified as someone who fit the construct, an inquiry was made to determine whether he or she would be interested in participating in the study. Since Collins notes that the people in his study resembled servant-leaders and the researchers concurred, it was determined



that some participants would be executives currently practicing servant-leadership. An organization well-known in the field of servant-leadership, TDIndustries of Dallas, Texas, was approached and asked if they would participate. The Human Resources leader was interested in the study and agreed to the request. Four executives from the organization who fit the construct were then nominated. Two executives from a local Twin Cities credit union who had embraced both servant-leadership and the *Good to Great* findings as part of their operating philosophy were also identified. It was determined that six to ten participants would provide ample data for these initial case studies and the nomination process was stopped when nine participants were confirmed.

In summary, all participants held leadership positions in their organizations. Eight of the nine had line responsibility. Three were CEOs, and a fourth was a former CEO. All had extensive work experience and their ages ranged from late 40s to early 60s. Organizations represented included a construction company, a bank, a credit union, a publishing company, and a food distributor. These organizations were primarily located in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area with the exception of TDIndustries, headquartered in Texas. A limitation of this study was that some of the Texas-based interviews were conducted via conference-call; another was that only one participant was female and no minority groups were represented.

Each selected participant was then asked to name three direct reports (DRs) who they believed knew them well enough and had worked with them long enough to provide meaningful insight into their leadership style, preferably a year or more. This study chose to interview direct reports because subordinates' perspectives have been linked with managerial job performance ratings and it also provided a measure of triangulation (Hogan et al., 1994). It was important that the DRs had a depth of experience in the organization and that they could reflect on and articulate their experience in a meaningful way. A possible limitation of the study is that the leaders may have picked direct reports who they felt would provide more positive com-



ments on their style, or who they thought might be willing to give the time, rather than identifying a broad spectrum of opinions.

Development of Questions

The development of the initial interview script was guided by the critical competencies of the Level Five leader as identified by Collins plus basic managerial competencies such as decision-making and communication. The competencies of the servant-leader were also researched and questions regarding these were woven into the script. This approach is consistent with the findings of Strauss and Corbin (1998), who note that an examination of previous research and literature will also provide the necessary background information and will suggest a variety of theoretical and conceptual frameworks. Consistent with this method, the researchers drafted domains and then developed broadly based questions designed to access the basic behaviors unique to this personal leadership style. As the interviews were conducted and the relevant data was gathered and analyzed, investigation into some competencies was expanded while exploration of others was abridged or aborted.

A separate and different set of questions was developed for the direct reports; these addressed behaviors that they would have encountered and witnessed in various work situations. Both subjects and direct reports received their questions several days prior to the interview, consistent with CQR methodology (Hill, 1997).

Interviews

All participants were interviewed face-to-face in their environment, usually by both researchers. This enabled the researchers not only to interview the leader, but also to observe the leader's facility, his or her interactions with other members of the organization, and interactions among other members of the organization, as well as the overall climate of the organization. Direct reports were interviewed primarily face-to-face except for a



few cases in which geographical distance or time constraints made it necessary to conduct the interview via phone.

Instruments

In addition to interviews, observations, and various documents, the study infused additional intentional triangulation by incorporating the Occupational Personality Questionnaire (OPQ) and Motivation Questionnaire (MQ). These were administered electronically to all participants. The OPQ and the MQ were developed and published by Saville-Holdsworth Limited (SHL Group) and have been used extensively for selection purposes in business. An ipsative version of the OPQ, recommended for selection purposes, was used. The OPQ measures personality characteristics important in the world of work in three domains of Relationships, Thinking Styles, and Feelings and Emotions. It takes approximately 45 minutes to complete. The MQ examines motivating factors in work in four domains: Energy and Dynamism, Synergy, Intrinsic, and Extrinsic. It takes approximately 20 minutes to complete. Both instruments were developed using subjects in professional or supervisory positions. Copies of both instruments were provided free of charge to the researchers in exchange for a copy of the study results.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

To some degree, the analysis of the data began with the dialectic as the researchers discussed and categorized the data and checked and verified these categories with each other. The analysis then proceeded with the transcription of the 32 interviews. To protect the anonymity of the direct reports, participants were coded one through nine (e.g. SBJ1) and the direct reports were listed by their respective participant and then identified by number (eg. SBJ1, DR2). Each interview transcription was identified only by this coding. These transcriptions totaled over 190 pages. All participants were sent their transcriptions to review and were able to make



changes. They did not receive the transcripts of the DRs. At times, the transcription process generated more questions, which were sent to the participant with the transcription for his or her consideration. The responses of the participants were then incorporated into the transcription as a final version.

Following the CQR methodology, 16 domains were identified by the researchers after reading the transcripts. The comments of the interviewees in the transcriptions were then separated into clearly distinct thoughts, sometimes by breaking sentences, and categorized into the domains. In two instances subjects were contacted by phone or email to clarify an ambiguous point. On some occasions, comments were placed into more than one category. The researchers worked closely together to discuss and categorize the data. This method requires that the researchers maintain an honest, open dialogue; it values researchers' working collaboratively to "construct a shared understanding of the phenomena" (Hill et al., 1997, p. 522). This provides a check and balance for the researchers by not requiring that one person alone collect and code all the data. Nuances and shades of meaning were examined and discussed, context was considered, and an attempt was made to remain unbiased and objective. The consensual qualitative research model requires "mutual respect, equal involvement, and shared power" (p. 523), a process that worked well for the researchers. However, in its purest form, the CQR method would have required a team of researchers, a pool of judges trained to code, and auditors to judge and verify results. This was beyond the means of the researchers.

Comments were then paraphrased with attention to simply rewording the interviewees' actual words in an objective manner, following the CQR methodology. "Our general rule is to make as few inferences as possible about the meaning of the data at this stage and to remain as close as possible to the participant's perspective of the experience" (Hill et al., 1997, p. 546). The researchers were careful not to add interpretations to the comments or otherwise change the meaning. A composite report for each participant was then developed, incorporating the paraphrased thoughts from



both the leader and direct reports into one document, along with representative quotes. After all individual case studies were analyzed, a cross-analysis was done to determine consistency across cases.

A bulleted list of 185 specific characteristics/behaviors shared by all nine participants was developed. Characteristics that were compelling or impressive, yet not shared by all nine participants, were eliminated at this juncture. Perhaps not surprisingly, the domain of Leadership had the highest number of items. Thirty-four characteristics were included in more than one domain. For example, “admits gaps in knowledge” was seen as a behavior that fit both the Decision-Making and Communication domains.

The direct reports were asked to “list five adjectives you would use to describe this person” during their interviews. A list of these adjectives was compiled separately from the transcriptions. An affinity diagram was then created, clustering related words and labeling each cluster. This will be discussed more in the Results section.

The results of the OPQ and MQ were then analyzed and descriptive statistics developed for illustrative purposes only, given the small sample size. The OPQ and MQ results are reported in standard scores called stens, with a mean of 5.5 and SD of 2. The means and standard deviations were computed for all the participants for 33 scales on the OPQ and 17 scales on the MQ. One participant did not complete the MQ.

RESULTS

The study incorporated data from a variety of sources to develop a better understanding of a leader who is unassuming, yet achieves strong results. The analysis paid particular attention to determining if there were characteristics that were common across all data sources to assess trustworthiness. The study revealed that indeed, findings from the participant interviews, the interviews with the direct reports, and the results of the OPQ and MQ were consistent. In addition, the various approaches provided a complementary perspective. For example, several direct reports volunteered information about situations in which they themselves had failed to meet



expectations, and how their supervisor had behaved. This information would not have been available to the study via the instruments.

As mentioned previously, 185 specific behaviors and motivators were identified in this study. Although these attributes may be useful in and of themselves for selection and development purposes, some summarization of key findings is also appropriate.

Qualitative Key Findings

A number of themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews and documents and the observations of the researchers. These themes consisted of the following qualities of leaders: problem-solving approach, interpersonal capability, motivators, steadfast yet realistic pursuit of goals, humility and self-effacing humor, highly principled, importance of culture, inquiring communication style, judicious use of power, commitment, and modesty. Each of these will be discussed in more detail.

Problem-Solving Approach

He thinks about organizational wisdom, not just facts and figures. (SBJ5, DR2)

Since this leadership style is shown to be highly effective in achieving business results, something which was also demonstrated by the participants in this study, how they achieve this was of particular interest to the researchers. A key element appears to be their problem-solving approach. All participants saw complexity in situations. They further recognized the limits of their knowledge and were keenly aware of the need for a decision-making process that was respectful of diverse opinions, encouraged debate and open communication, and was focused on a quality rather than an expedient outcome.

I try to convey the idea that they are included and I invite their ideas. I



invite them to fully participate in whatever it is we are working on. And I listen and I give them feedback. And I try to make it very constructive. Feedback that is personal but helpful. So that they can come back and say “OK, well this is my thinking and this is why I think the way I do.” (SBJ9)

Whenever possible, decisions were openly discussed with employees and various options were put on the table. As one leader stated, “I involve the people closest to the issue to solve the problem. The people doing the work think it is their idea. And they are the quickest to change if it isn’t working and try something else” (SBJ3).

They were also very reflective people and tended to contemplate before acting. They ask questions. This thoughtfulness is likely a factor in their growth as individuals. As one leader stated:

I was fortunate to look at things differently, you know, to study things, to observe it. And I watched my manager, who was a manager of managers, and say, “What would I do in this situation? Why is this working, why isn’t it working?” And then as I became a manager, I was able to go back and say, “Here’s the philosophy I am going to live by.” (SBJ5)

Their decision-making process was thorough, though not hesitant. It would be unfair to characterize them as consensus-makers. All were very aware of which decisions were solely theirs, and they did not shirk these tough decisions. It was very clear to the researchers that through this process, optimal decisions were made, and importantly, employees feel a part of the decision-making process. Decision quality and buy-in from employees are certainly success factors in achieving business results for these leaders.

Interpersonal Capability

I think your values and what you believe. . . that’s going to determine your approach. And as complicated as relationships are, that’s as compli-



cated as one's approach to leadership and being the person you are.
(SBJ6)

Although not specifically mentioned in the construct, all participants shared a strong interpersonal capability, an intriguing result for the researchers. Their ability to operate in a highly nuanced manner indicates strong emotional intelligence, keen recognition of their role, and the importance of a long-term perspective. They put a great deal of thought into important discussions with people and carefully considered the method of delivery and the message given; compassion, and a deep respect for people played a significant part in their interactions. One leader said: "If it's a people issue, I need to make time for it. I like to walk on the beach to work things through. I need time to process" (SBJ2). Direct reports repeatedly conveyed how much they appreciated this characteristic. One person offered the following:

I talk to him about personal things. I feel I can trust him. He listens a lot. He may throw out scenarios. He doesn't tell me what to do. He asks questions. He doesn't give advice. He shares what he has been through. "Do it in a way you are comfortable with," he'll say. "This may help you." (SBJ4, DR1)

This is consistent with other research which indicates that the leader characteristic of having a humanistic approach is highly valued by staff (Wood & Vilkinas, 2004). There were numerous stories of how the supervisor had displayed a deep and genuine concern for them, sometimes retelling events that had transpired many years before. During several interviews the researchers observed moments when the participant was clearly disturbed, sometimes visibly emotional, regarding the impact of his or her actions on the employees. However, at other times, it became apparent that this type of leader may appear to delay performance discussions or at times may provide feedback in such a subtle manner that others may not "get the message."



Motivators

Telling me I can't do something is. . . the best motivation you can give me because I am going to try and come through and prove it. And not in a grandstanding kind of style, just let the track record see where it will take you. (SBJ8)

This type of leader strives to make an impact and leave a legacy through an organization that is financially healthy and composed of a capable team that can successfully address whatever business challenges they face. They are not motivated by status or personal advancement, but by a sense of contribution. As one leader said:

Maybe it's ambition to serve. I don't know. I can't say for sure what makes me aspire to leadership. I like making a difference. I like impacting things. I don't think it's an ego thing. It's a duty thing. I like helping. But I will say, being honest, that it feels good to be acknowledged for that. (SBJ1)

These leaders tend to be risk-takers who constantly strive for high quality, focusing on a cycle of continuous improvement, rather than achieving a specific financial target. One leader described sending a 13-page memo to his boss, the president, providing a detailed argument for moving the business in a direction that was quite different from their current strategy. Oftentimes, this risk-taking was a factor in the direct reports' enjoyment of their jobs. One DR, talking about a series of mergers the organization had gone through, told the researchers that he stayed in the organization because it was exciting and he wanted to see what would happen next.

Developing people was also perhaps as important as building a business. As one participant said, "The magic for me is when the passion builds in the group. It's not me" (SBJ3). Another said, "I like to help people find what is within themselves" (SBJ9). Yet another said, "but the part I really get a kick out of is watching other people enjoy the challenge" (SBJ5). Not



only did the researchers hear comments like these repeatedly from both the participants and the DRs, but the comments were said emphatically. It was clearly an important aspect of their leadership style.

Steadfast yet Realistic Pursuit of Goals

I couldn't imagine *not* doing it. I just didn't even think about it. (SBJ1)

The participants were all tenacious in pursuing ambitious goals. There were numerous stories of what appeared to be highly risky situations through which the leaders persevered because it was very clear to them that this was the right path, even though they were perhaps not able to see all the road signs leading to their destination. However, they also knew when another approach was clearly indicated, and they would adjust accordingly. They were able to remain passionate, yet objective. Their ability to remain somewhat detached appeared to be a good counterbalance to their strong sense of commitment.

Humility and Self-Effacing Humor

We had a school play and he was a bird in a gilded cage. (SBJ7, DR4)

Because modesty was an aspect of the construct, it is not surprising that the participants all exhibited a strong sense of humility. However, it also bears mentioning that this came through repeatedly in the interviews, particularly in the participants' tendency to employ a sense of humor that poked fun at themselves, and also in a distinct lack of comfort with official or prestigious titles. These leaders were anything but pompous.

Their self-effacing sense of humor enhanced their authenticity and likeability. In fact, it seemed to the researchers that the participants took pains to be authentic. The researchers found themselves immediately comfortable in their presence. By building rapport and conveying a down-to-earth style, it was easy to have a conversation with them. It also likely



supports an environment that gives permission to admitting to mistakes and lack of knowledge, rather than placing energy on impression management. This style of humor was interpreted by the researchers as an indication of their self-confidence and level of comfort with themselves; however, it is obvious that this view may not be shared by everyone. In some cultures this approach could, perhaps, work against them. Also, their sense of humor combined with a driven, results-oriented style may, at times, be confusing to people unaccustomed to this style.

Highly Principled

[The CFO] was presenting some numbers on benefits changes. When we added it up, we realized we had more money than we needed. [He] was ignoring this. I thought it was important to give it back to the employees. I said, "We need to do this." He kept ignoring me. I said, "You aren't listening to me!" It felt like I was mean. In the end, though, we did decide to give it back. Others came up to me afterwards and said they were glad I pressed the issue. I feel I am the conscience of the group. I ask questions that others don't. (SBJ7)

It was anticipated that the participants would be people with integrity, as this was specifically mentioned in the construct. However, it was impressive to discover how highly principled they all were and how this guided their actions in a very central way. One of the leaders repeatedly used the phrase "What's the right thing to do?" (SBJ5). Several direct reports spoke of actions the participant had taken that were not easy or expedient, but chosen because they were clearly the best option from a values perspective. It also became apparent how the leader's strong sense of character engendered loyalty among employees and created deep emotional bonds. One DR said, "I've never liked a job as much as I like this one. It's like your dad. You want him to be proud of you" (SBJ5, DR3). Another said, "I admire him personally and professionally. So many people want to come work for him. We owe him what he gives us. We owe each other what he gives us" (SBJ3, DR2). The direct reports expressed a sense that



they could trust their job to this person because they knew the leader would take actions that would be fair to the employee and would not act out of self-interest. This was mentioned repeatedly in the interviews with direct reports. As one DR said, “Why do I follow him? Because I could put my wallet full of \$500 bills on the table and come back a week later and it would still be there. I *trust* him!” (SBJ8, DR2).

Importance of Culture

I think that the biggest obligation we have is for the culture. (SBJ6)

The importance of the culture and their role in defining it was hugely important to the participants. As one leader said, “The president of the organization is the president of the culture. He achieves the least of the business results” (SBJ1). All participants conveyed a very intentional approach to culture and often took swift action to preserve it.

They were aware of how business results and the corporate culture are closely connected and worked carefully not to sacrifice one for the other. Another leader said, “We went out of our way to be fair to people. We went about the merger in a very deliberate way because we were dealing with people’s livelihood” (SBJ7). And because these leaders have a highly attuned interpersonal sense, they are aware of subtle inconsistencies between desired cultural attributes and actual behavior on the part of employees.

Inquiring Communication Style

If I ran the meeting, it would be all what [I] want. That’s what these people will do because [of my position]. And I know I could probably influence them into what conclusion I came to. But that is also not my role. My role is to give them information, coaching and technical advice for them to make the decision. (SBJ4)

These leaders are very aware of the power of their opinion and use it



carefully. They tend to inquire, solicit, and offer ideas rather than issue commands. Several use stories as a way of conveying an idea. They are not oblique, however, and will insert their opinions, if necessary, or state that things must be done a certain way. However, their preference is not to do this. Part of their motivation may be to enhance the problem-solving ability of others through subtle coaching, rather than telling, and thereby grow the organizational thinking capacity. They are also acutely aware that if they tell others what they think too soon, the employees may comply without real buy-in, and it is this long-term commitment they are interested in achieving. This approach requires patience on the part of the leader and sensitivity on the part of the subordinate. Just because their supervisor isn't telling them what to do, doesn't mean he or she doesn't care very deeply about moving in a particular direction. Again, this aspect of leadership style could be misinterpreted by others.

Judicious Use of Power

Leadership gives you influence. It does give you power. All kinds of power. I prefer influence to power. (SBJ1)

As mentioned above, these leaders are very aware of their positional power, and the researchers were particularly interested in how a modest person deals with the power of the position. The researchers found that power was used carefully, and usually to remove barriers. Speaking to the subtlety of one leader's use of power, a DR said, "He's a bright but soft light bulb. The light is everywhere, but he doesn't blind anyone" (SBJ7, DR2).

The participants were attuned to small but meaningful symbols of power, such as the arrangement of a room. In only one case, for example, did a leader choose to be interviewed behind his desk. One participant spoke of this:

I am aware that I am a big guy, so I know I can tower over people; so I sit at a table instead of standing. I want the message to be the thing, not my



size, not have it be “Here is this big guy staring down at me.” . . .we have it in, “Where is your comfort zone?”, not “Come to my office.” (SBJ2)

Commitment and Modesty

One person can’t make this happen. It is going to take all of us working very, very hard, and I still don’t know if we are going to do it. It’s nothing I am going to do. I don’t even know how to do it. I’ll clear the way. I try to be honest and give my perspective. I’ll have opinions of where we ought to go. But on a day-to-day basis, things will shift. (SBJ3)

The two characteristics Collins ascribes to the Level Five leader seem to relate to a number of attributes displayed by the participants. All of them seemed to have strong intellectual horsepower, although this was not directly assessed. In addition, they all possessed a keen intuitive understanding of people, quiet confidence, and a reflective and principled nature. These leaders understand the situations they encounter at a level of complexity that many others do not. And they are honest with themselves, first and foremost. They understand their strengths and limitations and recognize that they are fallible human beings. They know that others have talents which they don’t, and that they need those individuals to be successful. They have a strong sense of duty and this weighs on them. They recognize that many others depend on them, and they choose their actions carefully. Once committed, they are very clear about the goal and the difficulties facing them. The question of whether commitment and modesty are outward manifestations of a cluster of other attributes would be an interesting topic for another study.

Five Adjectives Exercise

As mentioned previously, the DRs were asked the question “What are five adjectives you would use to describe this person?” Given that a lexi-



con of adjectives is frequently used to build personality constructs, this seemed like a useful question. The Affinity Diagram is shown here.

FIVE ADJECTIVES AFFINITY DIAGRAM

Interpersonal	Character	Problem Solving	Work Habits	Inspired Leadership	Self-Assurance
CARING Caring (6) Kind (5) Understanding (3) Compassionate (3) Empathetic (2) Loving (2) People-oriented Big-hearted Sympathetic Supportive Encouraging Nurturing Thoughtful gestures	AUTHENTIC Honest (3) Leads by example Genuine (2) Sincere DEPENDABLE Dependable (3) Dedicated Reliable MODEST ADMITS FAILURES ETHICAL Ethical/moral Trustworthy SPIRITUAL (3)	LISTENER DOESN'T BLAME OPEN-MINDED Open-minded (2) Sees others' POV Appreciates diversity THOUGHTFUL Thoughtful (3) Analytical (2) Reflective DECISIVE KNOWLEDGEABLE INSTINCTIVE VISIONARY Visionary Forward-thinking INTELLIGENT Intelligent (2) Smart CREATIVE	PROMPT THOROUGH DRIVER Driver (2) Results-oriented PERFECTIONIST Perfectionist Demanding EFFICIENT Efficient Good organizational skills	COURAGEOUS CHALLENGES THE SYSTEM INSPIRATIONAL ADVENTUROUS ENTHUSIASTIC Enthusiastic Passionate	STRONG EVEN-KEELED POLISHED SELF-ASSURED
ENABLES PEOPLE Enables people Helps people					
SELF-GIVING					
PATIENT					
LOYAL					
ACCESSIBLE					
SOCIAL					
EMOTIONAL					
LIKEABLE					
NICE					
FUN (2) Happy Jolly					
HUMOROUS (2)					
FAIR (5)					
TRUSTING (4)					



As can be seen from the chart, six categories emerged from the analysis: Interpersonal, Character, Problem-Solving, Work Habits, Inspired Leadership and Self-Assurance. The largest grouping, by far, was Interpersonal. This was especially interesting, given that the Quiet Leader description did not mention interpersonal capability. The highest number of mentions within the Interpersonal category was in a cluster labeled “Caring” and within that, the words “Caring” and “Kind” were specifically mentioned 11 times by the DRs. The most widely shared characteristic reported by the participants and most meaningful to the direct reports was the leaders’ evident concern for their staff. This more than any other stands out as a defining attribute to the direct reports. The groupings that received the next highest number of mentions were “Character” and “Problem-Solving.” The portrait that emerges from the adjectives selected by the direct reports is a person who is caring, authentic, dependable, open-minded, employs a thoughtful decision-making style, strives for productivity and results, tends to challenge the status quo, and appears to be self-assured.

Quantitative Key Findings

It would be inappropriate to draw too many conclusions from the results of the two instruments administered, given the small sample size. However, the instruments were chosen as a way of cross-validating the findings from the interviews and did prove useful in this regard. Several interesting findings will be discussed here for illustrative purposes. As stated earlier, the mean on the OPQ is set at 5.5 stens and the standard deviation is 2 stens. Consequently, any score higher than 7.5 or lower than 3.5 would be more unusual. There were no scales in which the combined mean and standard deviation of our participant group fell outside these boundaries. However, there were four scales that trended high and one that trended low, and these are worth expounding upon (see below).



OCCUPATIONAL PERSONALITY QUESTIONNAIRE
NOTABLE SCALE RESULTS

Scale	Mean	Standard Deviation
Modesty	7.2	.8
Caring	7.1	1.0
Behavioral	7.0	1.2
Conventional	3.8	1.3
Trusting	7.6	1.6

Within the Relationships category, these were the Modesty Scale (a high scorer was defined as someone who dislikes talking about achievements) and the Caring Scale (a high scorer was defined as being sympathetic to the concerns of others, helpful and supportive). Within the Thinking Style category, the Behavioral Scale (in which a high score indicates a person who likes to analyze the motives of others and is inclined to take this into consideration in their decisions) was high for the composite group, while the Conventional scale trended lower (indicating that they are less constrained by tradition than other people and more inclined to follow novel approaches). Finally, within the Feelings and Emotions category, the Trusting scale was high, indicating that the leaders were inclined to see people as reliable and honest. A Thinking Style scale called Evaluative was mid-range, indicating that their analysis of situations is typical of most people.

These results suggest a servant-leader profile: someone who is compassionate and concerned for people, conveys trust in others, has an interest in others' ideas and considers them in a balanced manner, and is likely to deflect attention away from their own contributions. They are likely, as well, to place a high value on a supportive and respectful work environment, in which cooperation is valued over competition with others. The low score in Conventional may be related to the participants' being from



smaller organizations, which are often more nimble. Of note is that the scores related to Sociability were all average, indicating that while the leaders dislike talking about their accomplishments, they are generally extraverted. Modesty and introversion do not appear to be related.

On the MQ, like the OPQ, there were no scales which were outside the range of expected scores. However, there were four scales on which the participants scored more highly than would be typical, and three that trended lower (see below).

MOTIVATIONAL QUESTIONNAIRE
NOTABLE SCALE RESULTS

Scale	Mean	Standard Deviation
Power	7.3	1.9
Commercial Outlook	7.5	2.5
Recognition	3.8	1.4
Ease and Security	3.8	1.6
Personal Principles	8.5	1.2
Flexibility	7.4	2.3
Material Rewards	3.8	1.9

In the Energy and Dynamism domain, the composite scores on Power and Commercial Outlook were high. These scores indicate that the leaders in this study were more motivated by the opportunity to wield influence and authority in a situation with bottom-line impact than was expected, and that these areas are their main sources of energy at work. This is consistent with the Level Five leaders' drive for business results. This is also likely related to their positions in upper level management. The Power score was intriguing, as the topic of power was of key interest in this research. Because the participants are at high levels in their respective organizations, it is not surprising that they are motivated by situations they can drive.



The next set of scales in the MQ is called the Synergy cluster and relates to aspects of a work environment, but separate from the task, that may be motivating to people. The participants scored somewhat low on the Recognition and Ease and Security scales, but very high on the Personal Principles scale. In fact, this score was the highest of any scale on either instrument. This would indicate that they do not need praise and recognition from others or job security to the degree others do to feel motivated. However, they would find it very difficult to work in an environment with questionable ethics.

In the Intrinsic motivators category, the participants' composite score was high on Flexibility, indicating they preferred situations without much structure, while in the Extrinsic motivators category, the leaders in this study were less motivated by Material Reward than others might be. Their scores on a Status scale were more typical.

Their scoring pattern suggests that the participants are attracted to leadership roles because they believe they can make a financial impact in a principled organization, rather than because of the external trappings of success. Their relatively lower concern for pragmatic considerations of job security and compensation may be due to their current life situations. The results may be different among Level Five leaders who are younger and/or less financially secure.

Examining the OPQ and MQ results together, the pattern that emerges is of an inter-personally-oriented leader who elicits trust by conveying a sense of integrity and demonstrates a ready interest in the lives of employees and their ideas. This leader may have a somewhat entrepreneurial orientation and bring innovation to situations. Employees will likely feel that they helped contribute to the organization's success. There is also likely to be encouragement for trying rather than criticism for failing in these organizations. These leaders' ability to both identify and drive for business opportunities while building a loyal group around them that is similarly focused, is surely a key factor in their success.

The overall pattern seen in the quantitative results is similar to what



the researchers observed in the qualitative research. However, there are some differences that bear mentioning.

Initially, the high Power score was a bit surprising. The researchers heard repeatedly from DRs that they had not observed the leaders using power. However, it may be that “power” has become a somewhat inflammatory term in business, representing self-aggrandizement, rather than using influence and authority for a purpose beyond self-interests.

The mid-range score on Status was also surprising, as the researchers found in the interviews that these leaders seemed quite uncomfortable with status. Business cards and use of titles became a marker for modesty in this study. All the leaders downplayed their titles. One participant did not have a promotion that had occurred a year ago on his business card. Another did not even carry a business card. A typical comment by one of the leaders who happened to be President of his firm was:

One of the things is that there is no human being better than another. We’re all equal. You call me John, you don’t call me Mr. [X]. I don’t care what your title or role is. The responsibilities might be different, but that doesn’t mean you are different. (SBJ5)

The high scores on Modesty and Personal Principles were encouraging, as these characteristics were in the description and thereby confirmed the sampling approach used in the study. It was also consistent with what was revealed in the interviews. There was a distinct use of “we” rather than “I” in the interviews when discussing achievements. Furthermore, several times subjects mentioned that they had exited an organization because the dominant culture was inconsistent with their values.

A point worth mentioning is that the MQ does not assess developing people/coalescing a team as a motivator. However, this was seen as a very important factor for all the leaders in this study, as discussed earlier.



CONCLUSIONS

Most of the characteristics identified by Collins and Greenleaf were observed in this research. We found people who, as Collins stated, worked in a focused and disciplined manner toward the tenacious pursuit of goals. They were quick to deflect praise and credit others. They used a questioning style and engaged others in open debate. They all showed a commitment to high standards. The “ferocious resolve” that Collins found was observed in varying degrees. Some participants were faced with situations that were more dramatic than others. Confidence that they would prevail in the end, coupled with a clear sense of the challenges they faced (termed by Collins the Stockdale Paradox) was observed. Like Greenleaf, we found that the leaders were reflective and had a strong sense of who they were—their strengths, their limitations, and what was important to them. They were very engaged by the growth of people and facilitating that process. They had a questioning nature and employed it when solving problems and influencing. They cared deeply about people and felt tremendous responsibility for them. We did not uniformly observe prescience or the healing through shared wholeness that Greenleaf discusses. We saw a motivation for both achieving business results (Collins) and growing people (Greenleaf). The behaviors observed were consistent with the behaviors outlined in the model proposed by Dierendonck & Heeren (2006) and many of those by Russell and Stone. In addition, like Russell and Stone, we found organizational culture to be an important aspect of servant-leadership (as cited in Rennaker, 2006).

To characterize these leaders based on competencies or personality attributes would be inadequate. Character plays a strong role in shaping who they are, consistent with both Collins’ and Greenleaf’s findings. Collins equivocated on whether this is a leadership style that one can grow into, or whether a Level Five leader is born, not made. This study would assert that a principled and discerning nature is essential in this type of leader, and that without it, coaching for development is fruitless. It also suggests incorporating character as an element in the selection process, as the companies



in Collins' study did. Although it is obvious how difficult this may be to address, it is a necessary and fundamental element of this type of leader.

In seeking to identify these individuals, it is important to pay attention to the processes people used to achieve goals, not simply the results. This study revealed that these leaders are as concerned with the "How" as much as the "What." Seeking out feedback from direct reports is important as well, since a key element of success for this type of leader is the ability to gain followers through their character and competence and their strong interpersonal capability. Finally, examining the hiring and promotion processes can be revealing. Do the ratings purposely weight people who are skilled at impression management over those who are less self-promoting? It is our hope that this research can be helpful in providing a richer portrait of these individuals so that they can be more readily identified in hiring decisions and talent management discussions.

Although some key findings have been uncovered in this study, there is opportunity for future research. A study that includes more women and minorities is called for. Not only would it allow the key findings to be further validated, but also it would be helpful in developing a statistical comparison between this leadership type and the norms captured by SHL on upper level managers for the OPQ and the MQ. In addition, the concept of modesty in leadership continues to intrigue us and offers many fruitful areas for further study. These leaders appear to be highly self-aware, though this study did not specifically probe this topic. What is the link between modesty and self-knowledge? Is a person who is reflective by nature more modest? How does a belief in a Higher Being contribute to modesty? Are people who are modest more emotionally intelligent? A new research focus on transcendental leadership that is emerging in the leadership literature (Sanders, Hopkins, & Geroy, 2003) may be useful in shedding some light on these questions. Finally, we would encourage more researchers to pay attention to other aspects of the servant-leader besides interpersonal capabilities. While this is an attractive aspect of these leaders, research focused



on it alone does a disservice to an effective type of leader by not addressing such important qualities as a drive for business results.

We look forward to future studies on this topic. Like Collins, we found these leaders to be both admirable and enjoyable to meet. We always came away from the interactions feeling uplifted and wishing a bit wistfully that we could work in these organizations. Like the heroic leader, the participants draw people to them. However, while some heroic leaders might become wearisome because of their arrogance, the modesty of the leaders encountered in this study would certainly contribute to steadfast loyalty and trust. And the good news is, if we are willing to put aside mythological beliefs about what good leaders look like, potential Level Five leaders abound in business settings. "The problem is not, in my estimation, a dearth of potential Level Five leaders. They exist all around us if we know what to look for" (Collins, 2001, p. 37). We hope this study has contributed to advancing that goal.

NOTE

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