

*Canadian Leaders' Perception of Effective Leadership  
Qualities*

Eli Konorti, Fairleigh Dickinson University  
Bahareh Assadi, Fairleigh Dickinson University  
Farshad Sarmad, Fairleigh Dickinson University

---

## **Introduction**

There is a lack of consensus in the literature about what makes an effective leader. Cliffe (2015) suggested that there is often a disconnect between leadership qualities that individuals perceive as necessary versus actual competences required to be an effective leader. Kruger and Dunning (1999) confirmed that people with the least amount of competence often secure positions of authority, due to their overconfidence in their abilities. Tarakci et al. (2016) concluded that leaders' technical knowledge of the field was the most prominent factor positively influencing team performance. In contrast, Goleman (1998) argued, "[while]...technical skills are important, emotional intelligence [EI] is the sine qua non of leadership" (p. 1). However, Goleman's (2000) view of EI as a set of acquired competencies has been a highly contested point in the literature (e.g., Bar-On, 2004; Mayer & Solovey, 1997; Petrides, 2009).

Kotter (2001) distinguished between management and leadership, arguing that leadership is not about hard skills such as budgeting and planning, but a set of abstract soft skills such as setting direction and motivating others. Drucker (2004), however, suggested that leadership is not about personality or charisma, but about following a set of rules that allows the leader to gain knowledge, turn it into action, and ensure accountability. As such, Drucker implicitly views leadership as a set of hard skills, a perspective more closely aligned with Cliffe (2015) and Tarakci et al. (2016), rather than Goleman (1998) and Kotter (2001).

In sum, the research to date has failed to produce the definitive characteristics of great leaders. Sarmad (2016) highlighted the proposition that the disparity around definitions of EI constructs has been primarily due to a culture clash between a science-driven side (with an emphasis on empirical confirmation and scientific caution) and a practice-driven side (with a focus on solving real-world problems). Since EI forms the building blocks of leadership, it is possible that the lack of consensus on what makes an effective leader is also due to a similar clash.

There is scarce research that explores effective leader qualities from the perspective of an assigned leader. An assigned leader is an individual given a formal leadership position in their organization.

## **Purpose of study**

The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore the qualities of good leaders as perceived by Canadian assigned leaders. Leader quality is defined as a unique attribute or characteristic possessed by an individual.

## **Problem statement**

Scholars and practitioners have yet to reach consensus on qualities that make a good leader. This poses a challenge to Canadian organizations attempting to implement succession-planning programs aimed at filling key positions within the organization. Canadian organizations need to develop criteria for identifying effective leadership qualities in developing succession-planning initiatives.

## **Significance of the study**

Canadian organizations can harness leadership potential using the five leadership qualities that the study has identified. The results of the study can help future leaders and organizations in a number of ways. First, for both current and future leaders, the study identifies qualities they can enhance to become effective leaders. Second, academics and individuals that coach leaders can incorporate the results of the study into leadership teaching and training materials respectively. Finally, the findings can guide organizations during the recruitment, mentoring, and succession planning.

## Method

This qualitative cross-sectional study used purposeful and non-probability convenience sampling to gather data from 38 individuals in assigned leadership positions using face-to-face interviews and email correspondence. All participants were readily available and willing to participate (Cooper & Schindler, 2003). For the purpose of the present study, the research operationally defined a leader as an individual that had at least one follower and held the position for more than one year.

The participants were residents in the Province of British Columbia, Canada. Researchers did not limit participation because of gender, years of experience, age, current employment status, industry employed, age, or professional designation. The study did not consider education levels of participants.

The research used the lexical approach for the term ‘quality’ which is similar to the lexical approach to traits, “which assumes that traits can be described using single adjectives or descriptive phrases” (Psychologist World, 202, para. 4). In a few cases, the researchers went back to the participants to clarify the meaning of certain qualities that respondents listed in order to validate the meaning of the response. For example, one respondent used the word ‘has vision’ while another used ‘visionary’ and a third listed ‘vision’. The analysis grouped these three responses to mean ‘visionary’. In another case, the researchers combined synonymous words such as, ‘committed’ and ‘dedicated’ into a single adjective. The final tally of qualities was 29; down from the initial 190 responses.

## Findings

All 38 participants listed and returned five leadership qualities for a total of 190 responses. Twenty-nine or 76.3% of the respondents were male and nine or 23.7% were female. The age of the participants ranged from 28 to 65 with an average age of 45.39 years (SD = 12.64). The participants held a variety of leadership positions including but not limited to CEO, CFO, manager, and COO in a variety of industries including manufacturing, non-for-profit organizations, and healthcare.

Two key findings emerged from the responses. First, no two lists had the same five qualities. Second, no one quality appeared in all 38 responses.

The table below summarizes the top five responses by quality and the respective percentage of the total responses.

| Quality           | # Responses | % of Responses |
|-------------------|-------------|----------------|
| Visionary         | 26          | 68.4%          |
| Good communicator | 16          | 42.1%          |
| Courageous        | 16          | 42.1%          |
| Ethical           | 14          | 36.8%          |
| Exemplar          | 12          | 31.5%          |

Table 1. Top five qualities identified by participants

Canadian leaders believe that vision is the most important quality for an effective leader. Being a good communicator and courageous are also considered important. Having integrity and being an exemplar complete the list of the top five qualities. Other notable qualities listed include being organized and task oriented (mentioned six times), trustworthy and a team builder (mentioned five times) and being intelligent (mentioned four times). Other qualities mentioned include pragmatic, optimistic, responsible, and passionate.

## Conclusions

The findings of this study support Northouse's (2020) assertion that we are yet to provide a *definitive* set of qualities that make an effective leader. For example, Mason (2006) listed vision, passion, motivation, courage, and integrity as qualities that make an effective leader. On the other hand, Holsinger (2017) suggested that intelligence, self-confidence, integrity, determination, and sociability, makes an effective leader. Leadership in many respects is akin to beauty; it is in the eyes of the beholder. As such, "In many ways [leadership] still remains somewhat of an enigma" (Weiskittel, 1999, para. 1).

## Practical implications

The success of organizations is highly dependent on effective leadership (Kim, 2007 as cited in Amagoh, 2009). Knowing the qualities that make an effective leader can help organizations develop strategies for formal mentoring programs.

Organizations can use the findings of this study in a number of ways. First, harnessing effective leadership qualities gives organizations a competitive advantage and lays the foundation for organizational performance and growth (Kim, 2007 as cited in Amagoh, 2009). Second, organizations can incorporate the findings of this study into their mentoring programs. Amagoh (2009) postulated that mentoring programs are an effective way to harness desired leadership qualities. Moreover, Robinson-Walker (2013) suggested that leaders could collaborate and discuss how to enhance leadership skills. Third, organizations can use the findings in the development of succession planning. Ritchie (2020) suggested it would help to develop a pool of “well-prepared, contextually sensitive, dedicated leaders who are available for promotion whenever the need arises in the organization” (p. 33). Finally, organizations can use these findings during the recruitment process as well as for promotion practices (Nichols & Cottrell, 2014). Knowing the leadership qualities to look for, “shortens the time to hire when you do have a suitable vacancy” (Kirton, 2015, p.9).

## Limitations and future directions

This research provides a step forward to understand the qualities that make an effective leader. Understanding these qualities can assist organizations with succession planning, recruitment decisions, leadership development, and mentoring programs.

However, a limitation of the study is that the participants of the study were from a small geography, resulting in a relatively small sample with limited diversity with respect to culture, gender, and age, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research would benefit from conducting similar studies in other geographies with larger and more diverse samples.

Finally, as suggested by Nichols and Cottrell (2014), leaders’ perceptions of qualities of other leaders “depends on people’s schema of a leader as well as their experience with people in leadership positions” (p. 712) and that could lead to bias. Eliminating such bias can be difficult; however, a future a longitudinal study can assess test-retest reliability.

## References

- Amagoh, F. (2009). Leadership development and leadership effectiveness. *Management Decisions*, 47(6), 989-999.
- Bar-On, R. (2004a). The Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i): Rationale, description and summary of psychometric properties. In C. Coher (Ed.), *Handbook of emotional intelligence*. Jossey-Bass.
- Cliffe, S. (2015). Leadership Qualities vs. Competence: Which Matters More? *Harvard Business Review*, 2-5.
- Cooper, D. R., Schindler, P. S. (2003). *Business research methods* (8th ed.). McGraw-Hill Irwin.
- Drucker, P. (2004). What Makes an Effective Executive? *Harvard Business Review*, 82(6), 58-63.
- Goleman, D. (1998). What Makes a Leader? *Harvard Business Review*, 82(1), 83-91.
- Goleman, D. (2000). Leadership that Gets Results. *Harvard Business Review*, 78(2), 78-90.
- Holsinger, J. W. (2017). *Leadership for public health: Theory and Practice* (1st ed.). Health Administration Press.
- Kirton, H. (2015). "You're hired! Can you start in five years?" *People Management Periodicals*, 8-9.
- Kotter, J. (2001). What Leaders Really Do? *Harvard Business Publishing*, 79(11), 85-97.
- Kruger, J., and Dunning, D. (1999). Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One's Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77(6), 121-1134.
- Mason, C. (2006). What makes a good leader? *Primary Health Care* 16(10), 18-20.
- Mayer, J. D., & Salovey, P. (1997). What is emotional intelligence? In P. Salovey & D. J. Sluyter (Eds.), *Emotional development and emotional intelligence: Educational implications* (pp. 3-31). Basic Books.
- Nichols, A. L., & Cottrell, C. A. (2014). What do people desire in their leader? The role of

- leadership level on trait desirability. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 25(4), 711-729.
- Northouse, Peter G. (2020). *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (8th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Petrides, K. V. (2009). *Technical manual for the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaires (TEIQue)*. Psychometric Laboratory.
- Psychologist World. (2021, September 5). Five-Factor Model of Personality.
- Ritchie, M. (2020). Succession planning for successful leadership: Why we need to talk about successions planning. *Management in Education*, 34(1), 33-37.
- Robinson-Walker, C. (2013). Succession planning: Moving the dial from should to must. *WK Health Nursing Administration Quarterly*, 37(1), 37-43.
- Sarmad, F. (2016). Cross-Cultural Study of Trait Emotional Intelligence and Five-Dimensional Model of National Culture in the USA and China. *ProQuest Dissertation & Thesis Global (PQDT) Database*.
- Tarakci, M., Greer, L. L., & Groenen, P. J. F. (2016). When does power disparity help or hurt group performance? *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 101(3), 415–429.
- Weiskittel, P. D. (1999). The concept of leadership. *ANNA Journal*, 26(5), 467-468.