

what are the psychological skills of **effective leaders?**

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Background

It seems everyone is talking about leadership. Look at any business magazine, book or conference programme and you're sure to find substantial sections dedicated to finding and developing great business leaders.

Leadership is a very broad term and the pursuit of the formula for what makes an effective leader of people is a 'hot topic' in management literature and has provoked much interest from researchers, writers and psychologists.

Research in this area has focused on two main streams; firstly, identifying the differentiating qualities that make leaders successful. For example, Charan and Colvin's (1999) research into CEOs highlighted the importance of integrity and energy, combined with both business and people acumen. Goleman writes extensively about emotional intelligence as a key determinant of effective leadership (Goleman, 1998a) and our own research into what makes successful senior managers showed that openness to others, emotional balance and interpersonal warmth are key differentiators (Crump, 1999).

Secondly, research has focused on the characteristics or 'derailers' that cause leaders to fail. Lombardo and McCall (1983) conducted research with 20 'derailed' executives and suggest key factors to be 'insensitivity to colleagues', 'over managing' and the 'betrayal of trust' amongst others.

Objectives

As practising business psychologists, we were interested in gaining an up-to-date picture of the qualities of effective and ineffective leaders in business today, and examining which theories and past research still apply. We didn't want to impose a framework for assessing these qualities, instead we thought it would be interesting to take an alternative approach by asking people open questions about their own personal experiences of leaders and allowing them to answer in the way they wanted.

This led to three research questions:

- What are the qualities that make an effective leader?
- What are the qualities that are associated with poor leadership?
- How do perceptions of effective and ineffective leaders vary by age, gender and managerial level?

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Method

We used a survey questionnaire which included two open-ended questions about people's personal experiences of bosses they had worked for. The open-ended questions were:

1. Think of the best boss you have ever worked for, what made them a good boss?
2. Think of the worst boss you have ever worked for, what made them a poor boss?

In addition, the questionnaire asked people to report their age, gender and industry sector. The questionnaire was distributed as part of consultancy assignments, for example, during training programmes or following assessments.

In total, 250 questionnaires were completed. The sample consisted of the following demographic breakdown:

■ **Gender:** 54% female, 46% male

■ **Age:** 21% 17-25 years, 39% 26-35 years, 27% 36-45 years, 13% 46+ years

■ **Managerial level:** 39% non managers/specialists, 34% managers, 21% senior managers

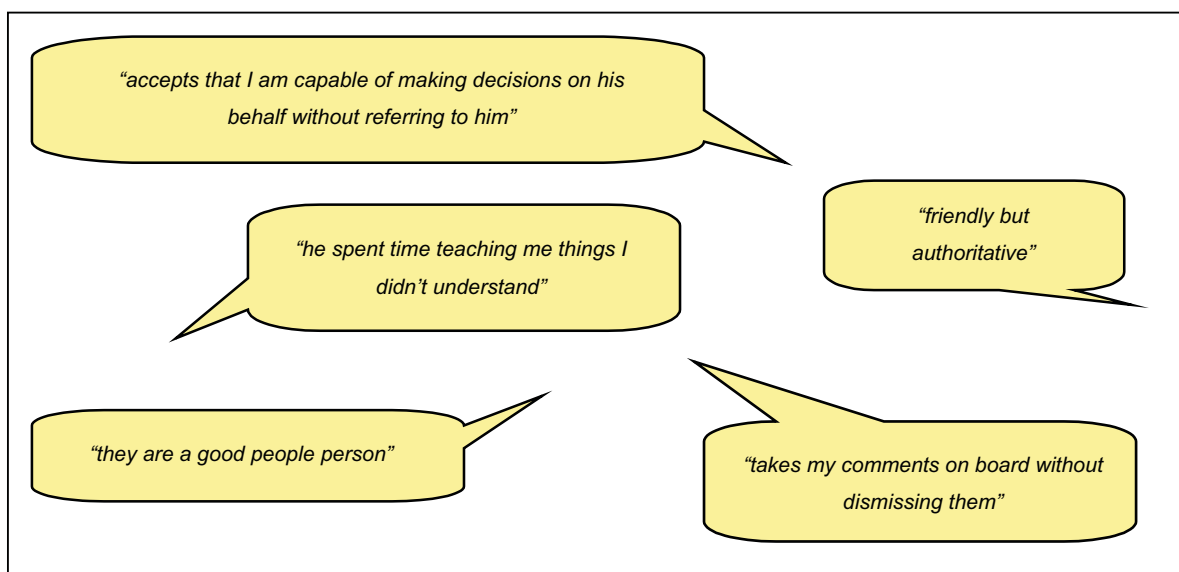
■ **Industry sectors:** 24% retail, 20% utilities, 8% financial services, 8% leisure, 8% IT. Others included medical, accountancy, aerospace, consultancy, manufacturing, and telecoms.

Results

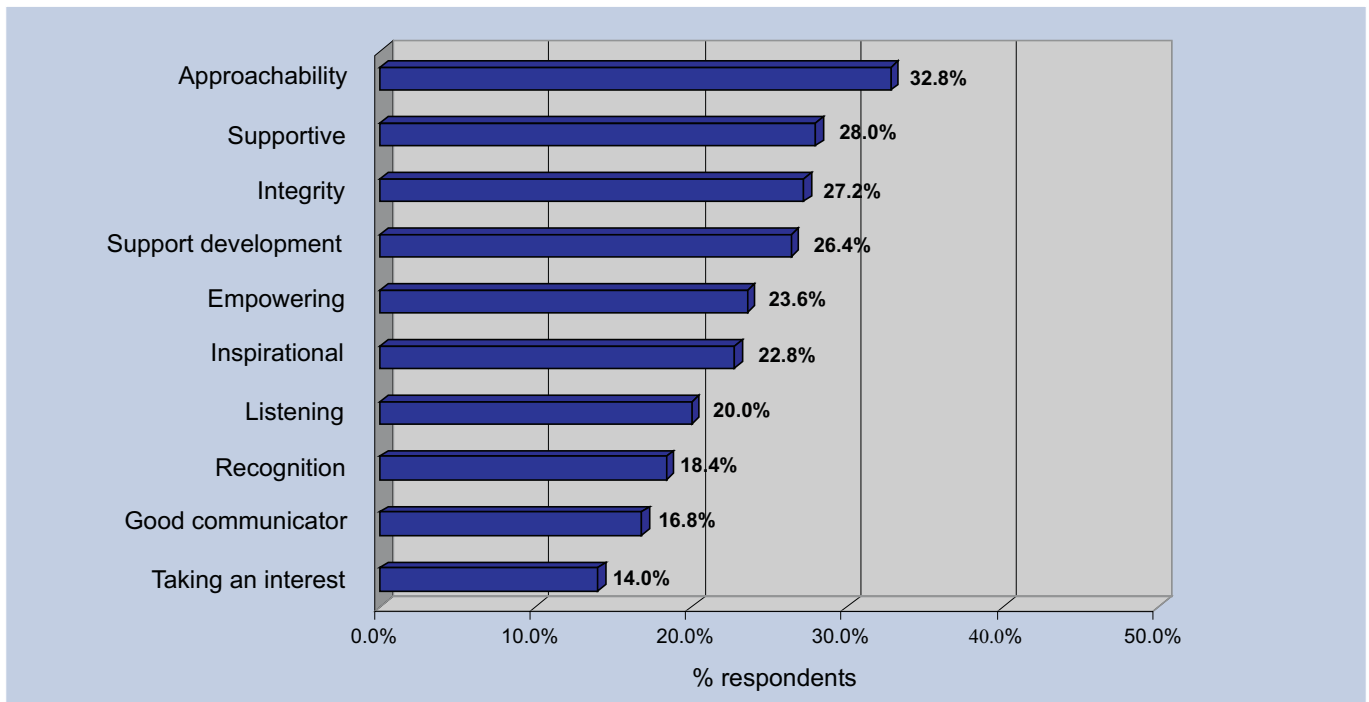
We analysed people's responses and created a set of categories according to the themes that emerged. The number of times each theme occurred was also recorded.

Question 1: Think of the best boss you have ever worked for, what made them a good boss?

Peoples' experiences of good bosses were varied:



In total, 856 statements about good bosses were classified into 44 categories of qualities. The ten most frequently occurring responses were:



The results indicate that the best leaders to work for are freely available and interact with their team, are understanding and caring whilst being fair and trustworthy and put effort into developing others. There are similarities with the research conducted by Charan and Colvin (1999), which found integrity, people and organisational acumen as being key differentiating qualities. It would seem people regard effective bosses as those with both typical 'leadership' qualities such as inspiration and empowerment but also the 'managerial' qualities such as providing support and making themselves approachable.

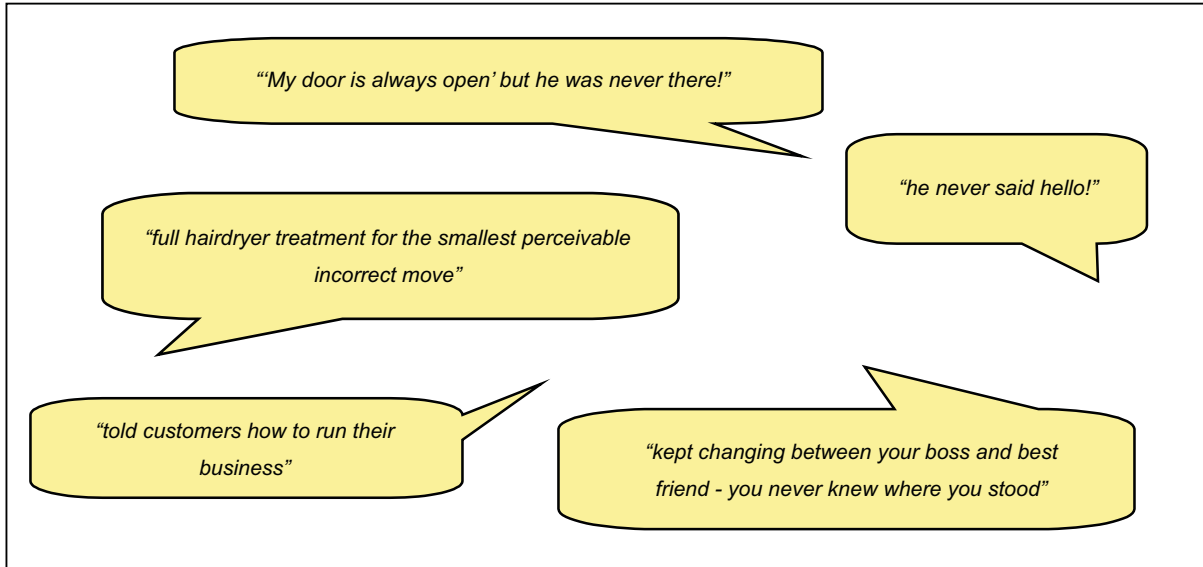
Looking at the underpinning psychological skills, it would seem that the psychological skill of interpersonal understanding underpins qualities such as 'approachability', 'listening' and being a 'good communicator'. In addition, having a strong appreciation of people management techniques and process links qualities such as 'supporting development', 'empowering', 'inspirational' and 'recognition'.

The 'Top 10' qualities were generally consistent across ages, genders and managerial levels. However, there were some interesting differences:

- **Managerial level:** 'Fun' was commonly seen as a quality of a good boss by non-managers, but was absent from the top ten responses for managers and senior managers. This suggests that it is particularly important for first line managers to have an overt sense of humour at work, whereas this becomes less of a priority higher up the organisation.
- **Age:** People over 35 years old mentioned 'inspirational' qualities, such as providing a source of motivation, much more frequently than their younger counterparts. Conversely 'approachability' and 'integrity' were higher priorities for younger workers. Perhaps this is reflective of older workers being more independent and therefore look to their leader for direction and drive rather than 'hands on' support.
- **Gender:** There were no major differences between male and female responses.

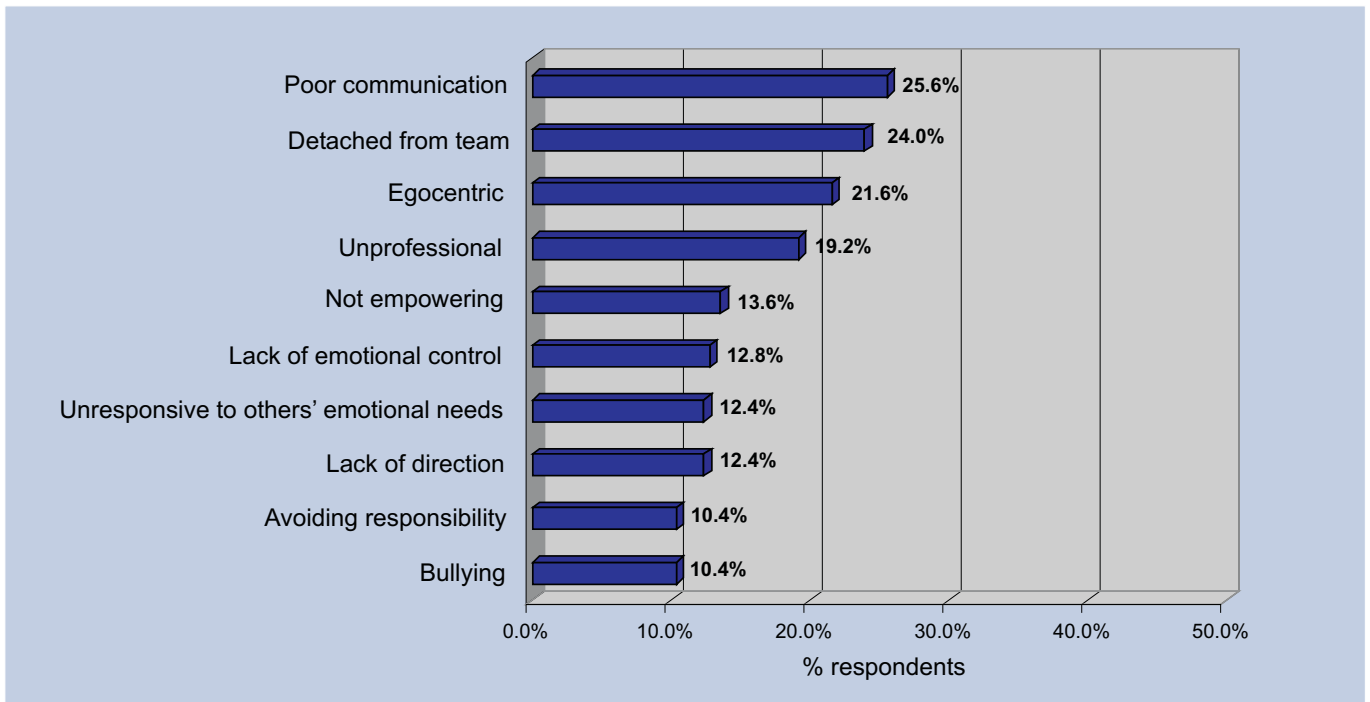
Question 2: Think of the worst boss you have ever worked for, what made them a poor boss?

Again, peoples' experiences of poor bosses were varied:



In total, 707 statements about poor bosses were classified into 57 categories of qualities.

The ten most frequently occurring responses were:



The results show that the worst bosses to work for are poor communicators, fail to interact with their team, focus on their own needs and lack integrity or are seen as dishonest. There appears to be evidence of dysfunctional personalities amongst the worst leaders such as 'detached from team' (schizoid), 'egocentric' (narcissistic) and 'unprofessional' (antisocial).

It is interesting to note that five characteristics in the top ten are to do with emotional competencies: 'egocentric', 'unresponsive to others' emotional needs', 'lack of emotional control', 'avoiding responsibility' and 'bullying'. This suggests that the inability to manage own emotions or anticipate others' emotions are particularly powerful 'derailers' of effective leadership, supporting the work of Lombardo & McCall (1983) and Goleman (1998a). Since this psychological skill is less apparent in qualities that make a good boss, it would imply that the absence of emotional intelligence is a 'derailer' but an abundance of the skill does not necessarily make a leader highly effective.

Again, the 'Top 10' qualities remained fairly consistent across managerial level, age groups and gender, however there were some notable differences:

- **Managerial level:** 'Not empowering' was amongst the top ten responses for managers and senior managers, however, this factor was absent from the top ten responses for the non-manager sample, suggesting that the need for autonomy is more important at senior levels.
- **Age:** 'Disrespectful' characteristics such as being patronising, and condescending were more frequently mentioned by under 35's than over 35's. This indicates that younger workers are more likely to rate a manager poorly if they are talked down to or given little respect.
- **Gender:** For males, 'egocentricity' was the most commonly cited characteristic of a poor boss, but was only the fourth most common for females. This suggests a boss who is selfish, interested in their own status or has a 'massive ego' is likely to be particularly ineffective when working with male direct reports.

Conclusions

There are several implications of this research:

- There are a broad range of qualities that make an effective leader. This research indicates that emotional intelligence, decision making, motivation, and interpersonal understanding are important core skills.
- Whilst the psychological skill of interpersonal understanding and the appreciation of how to manage people are particularly strong determinants of effective leaders, underdeveloped emotional intelligence is a critical 'derailer'.
- Leadership assessment should look for 'derailers' as well as the presence of positive qualities. A person's true potential for leadership is as much to do with their areas of risk, as it is to with their strengths.
- Core psychological skills, such as interpersonal understanding and emotional intelligence are difficult to develop. However, the impact that these skills have on a manager's ability to motivate and engage staff, means that the pay off for developing these skills is significant and therefore warrants the investment.

References

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