

What makes a leader great?

WRITTEN BY



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BRIEFLY SPEAKING

Are Great Leaders Born or Developed?

Thousands of articles have been written about leadership, what it is and what makes a leader great. So, you might think this issue would be settled by now. Of course, it isn't. One reason is that many of the books and articles offer opinions based on experience and personal belief backed by examples of greatness. These can be useful for highlighting important traits but they offer little in the way of advice for aspiring leaders who are faced with different circumstances. They also lack the certainty derived from analytical rigor.

One set of researchers has plumbed the data and the results are both surprising and illuminating. After analyzing over 200,000 feedback evaluations ("360s") of about 20,000 leaders, Dr. Folkman and his team found some clear correlations. What they found was surprising for both the simplicity of what it takes to be great and the nuances about how greatness is best developed.

Here are the headlines:

- There were sixteen differentiating competencies clustered in just five areas that really make a difference
- To be seen as extraordinary a leader needs to be in the top 10% in a small handful of these competencies
- Excelling in competencies across multiple clusters is better than grouping

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them in one

- Fixing weaknesses does not make a significant impact - *unless it is fixing a fatal flaw*
- Developing extraordinary strengths is often a matter of developing supporting competencies - i.e. often a non-linear approach is best

Let's look at these a little more closely. The five areas that the competencies cluster within are like poles supporting a tent. The center pole is Character. The four supporting poles are: Focus on Results, Personal Capacity, Leading Change, and Interpersonal Skills. Think of these poles as getting taller as they are developed. As these strengths are increased the total volume of the tent increases. Greater volume is symbolic of greater leadership effectiveness.

Here's what most people find stunning. Being in the top 10% *in just one* of the sixteen competencies put a leader at the 64th percentile of effective leaders in the feedback studied. That's all it took to be above average. ***With just four top 10% competencies leaders reached the 89th percentile!***

Of course, none of this matters if a fatal flaw exists. These absolutely must be fixed. Typically fatal flaws showed up in the following areas:

- Inability to learn from mistakes
- Interpersonal incompetencies
- Lack of openness to new ideas
- Tendency to blame others for problems
- Lack of initiative

So, how does one develop a small number of extraordinary strengths? Here are the key points. First start with strengths that already exist. Closing the gap between existing strengths and extraordinary strengths is easier than developing new ones. Second, concentrate on the overlap between these and the strengths valued by the organization and those that you have some enthusiasm for developing.

But here is the kicker, developing those strengths often requires a more nuanced approach of developing a supporting strength. At first glance this is a bit of a head-scratcher. Here's an example: Suppose you are a leader with strong technical or professional expertise who wants to move from good to great. A straightforward approach would be to add another certification or advanced degree to your resume. However, you may find that developing communication skills that allow your talent to be seen and acted upon is a far more effective approach. Similar examples can be provided for each of the sixteen differentiating competencies. In fact, a list of supporting competencies for each of the sixteen was identified by the statistical analysis.

These findings tend to show that great leaders can be made. Focused, intentional development lies at the heart of the process. Aspiring leaders who take responsibility for their own development will likely have an advantage.

Want to know more? The Extraordinary Leader by Zenger, Folkman goes into much greater detail on this work and its findings. The Extraordinary Leader 360 tool utilizes these findings and can be administered by certified coaches and consultants as well as the Zenger Folkman organization. As an executive coach certified in the use of this tool I would be glad to speak with you directly.