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How to Become a Better Leader

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Good leaders make their work look easy. But the reality is that most have had to work hard on themselves — by managing or compensating for potentially career-limiting traits. To grow as an executive, you need to recognize and manage your strongest tendencies.

BY GINKA TOEGEL AND JEAN-LOUIS BARSOUX

WHEN EXECUTIVES IDENTIFY a leader they admire, they often underestimate how much that individual may have struggled to curb certain patterns of behavior or certain dominant facets of his or her personality. Great leaders make it look easy. But in truth, the majority of effective leaders that we have observed — even so-called naturals like Virgin Group's Richard Branson — have worked hard on themselves.

The traits that serve an executive well in one leadership position often do not work well in another. Moving up the hierarchy into new roles or environments, executives may find they need to play up or rein in different facets of their personality. What were strengths can become weaknesses.

Fortunately, advances in personality research can provide executives with a much richer picture of their personality. Psychologists have identified countless traits that distinguish individuals from one another. Research in recent decades has converged toward five broad dimensions, each comprising a cluster of traits. These dimensions appear so robust that they have been dubbed the Big Five. Now widely accepted, the same five factors are found consistently with different research methods, as well as across time, contexts and cultures. (See "The Making of the Big Five," p. 53.)

In contrast with other models of personality, the Big Five were derived from the everyday language that people use to describe one another. Starting with a master list of nearly 18,000 personality descriptors, the list was eventually boiled down to five fundamental factors: need for stability,¹ extraversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness.



THE LEADING QUESTION

How can leaders recognize and manage their psychological preferences?

FINDINGS

- ▶ Executives need to understand their natural inclinations in order to modify them or compensate for them.
- ▶ Most successful executives have had to work hard on themselves.
- ▶ Leaders need to recognize their outlier tendencies and learn how others perceive those tendencies.

Of course, personality scores are not performance scores; no personality traits lead directly to positive or negative performance. However, those scores can alert executives to areas that require attention. A trait that is effective in one context may become redundant or counterproductive when the situation changes.² (See “The Curse of Your Qualities,” p. 54.)

Common Leadership Pitfalls

Leaders at all levels are under intense pressure to push harder and go faster. Under these conditions, executives sometimes have difficulty controlling their inherent psychological preferences. And the higher they go in an organization, the more their behaviors come under scrutiny and influence others.

Drawing on our extensive coaching work with senior executives, we identify some of the most common leadership pitfalls associated with high and low scores on each of the Big Five personality dimensions. (See “About the Research.”) We offer a mix of testimony from high-profile executives and anonymous quotes from executives we have coached to illustrate those potential hazards and how to deal with them. (See “Risks and Remedies, p. 55.”)

1. Need for Stability: How Much Stress Is Too Much?

Emotional stability can be a valuable quality for executives, helping them cope with stress, setbacks and uncertainty. But it has its drawbacks, too.

You can be too composed. Poise under pressure helps executives project a reassuring image when others may be inclined to panic. Many executives we coach pride themselves on their ability to remain calm. The risk of this trait is that they can appear uninspiring or lacking in urgency. They may have difficulty understanding why others are worried.

Moreover, such executives may come across as unduly confident. One strategy to counter overoptimism is to create mental lists. Alongside three hopeful reasons for why something will work out, an executive prone to overoptimism should come up with three gloomy reasons why it may not.

Or you can be too impatient — and overreact. Sometimes successful executives have a pronounced tendency to be impatient. Robert Iger, CEO of Walt Disney, has acknowledged in an article in the *New York Times* that this is an area he’s worked on: “I’ve learned, in general, to be more patient. . . . I’ve learned to listen better and manage reaction time better. What I mean by that is not overreacting to things that are said to me, because sometimes it’s easy to do that.”³

Certain executives we coach are less resilient to stress and struggle to stay calm, reflecting a high need for stability. Too often, they deal with their anger by suppressing it. The problem is that the anger can accumulate unseen and unexpressed until it spills over on an unsuspecting victim. To avoid overreacting, executives need to find ways of emptying their anger container before it reaches the brim. The simplest method is to verbalize those negative emotions: “I feel disappointed/frustrated/upset/irritated because” Research in brain imaging suggests that putting our feelings into words dampens those feelings.

Whether stating an emotion or writing it in a journal, the simple act of expressing it activates a region of the brain involved in forms of self-control and self-regulation.⁴ It is a bit like drilling a hole in the side of the anger container. Executives sometimes worry that verbalizing emotion will make them look weak. In fact, it conveys confidence. It expels negative energy while providing others with a better understanding of how the executive ticks.

2. Extraversion: How Much Company Is Too Much?

Extraversion reflects our desire to be with other people and to draw energy from them. Leadership is

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The research for this article is based on findings from more than 2,000 in-depth conversations with international executives regarding their personality scores. These interviews were conducted by us separately, while the executives were attending leadership programs at Duke University, London Business School and IMD.

We used the NEO PI-R five-factor instrument, which has become the dominant framework for researching personality and a staple ingredient in many leadership development programs. (Executives who have not been exposed to it can assess themselves free on a noncommercial version of the test, IPIP, available at <http://www.personalitytest.net/ipip/ipipneo1.htm>.)

The personality inventory comprises 30 facets, but not all of these are equally relevant to the work environment. Based on our experience, particularly Ginka Toegel’s previous work as a practicing psychotherapist, we spent 80% of the time in our one-to-one sessions talking about 15 of those dimensions, which we believe represent the top challenges for most executives.

The confidential nature of these sessions prevent us from naming the executives, so we cite them anonymously. We also draw on publicly available interviews with high-profile business figures. Although we did not conduct Big Five personality inventories with these leaders, their comments reflect key insights about personality traits that they learned to manage as they moved into positions of leadership.

THE MAKING OF THE BIG FIVE

Psychologists have identified countless personality traits and dimensions that distinguish us from one another. But research in recent years has converged toward five broad dimensions, each comprising a cluster of traits that account for the majority of the differences among individual personalities. These dimensions have been dubbed the Big Five.

Although researchers did not set out to find five dimensions, that is what emerged from their analyses of the data. The line of research began with Gordon Allport and Harold Odbert, who scoured dictionaries to identify 17,953 words in everyday language that people use to describe one another and

published their results in 1936. That master list was reduced, in several stages, until it was eventually boiled down to just five dimensions in 1961 by two U.S. Air Force researchers, who had rare access to mainframe computers. Unfortunately, their findings failed to reach an academic audience until the 1980s. At that point, the introduction of the personal computer and the availability of specialized software enabled other research teams to factor analyze the data and confirm the existence of five overarching domains. The first inventory based on the Big Five factors was launched by Paul T. Costa, Jr. and Robert R. McCrae in 1985.ⁱ These five factors have since proved

a rich conceptual framework for integrating diverse research findings and theory in personality psychology.

The stronger the trait, the more likely it is that the person in question will display trait-related behaviors in terms of how he or she relates to people, solves problems, plans work and expresses himself or herself. Investigations into where those traits actually come from suggest that around half of the variance is inherited and the other half is acquired through experience, especially in early childhood.ⁱⁱ Though major life crises occasionally produce shifts on some personality dimensions, most changes in adulthood tend to be gradual and limited.ⁱⁱⁱ

about influencing people, so it can be an advantage to be outgoing, assertive and energetic. There is strong evidence that these characteristics help executives to be perceived as leaderlike.⁵ The association with effective leadership is much weaker.⁶

You can be too assertive — or too energetic. High scores on the extraversion dimension can trigger perceptions that the executive is too talkative or domineering — with the added implication that he or she tends not to listen. Many executives face this challenge, including the country manager of a global foods giant we coached. Discussing his proposed action plan, he conceded: “I’ve realized that I have a habit of taking over in meetings. I want to get better at listening and to give less assertive people more space to express their opinions. So I need to listen more, but I also need to show I have processed what they’ve said. The personality scores just confirm feedback I’ve received in the past but not paid much attention to.”

A simple remedy for executives with a tendency to dominate proceedings is the “four sentence” rule: Whatever you have to say, limit yourself to four sentences. Then ask: “Do you want me to carry on?”

Another facet of extraversion is higher activity levels. This would seem to be an advantage in terms of inspiring others, but it can prove wearing. This was a key learning point for a senior executive from the retail sector, who told us: “There’s a fine dividing line between energetic and frenetic — and I probably overstep that boundary on occasion. In the process, you end up creating chaos and unsettling people, rather than invigorating them.” Fast-paced people need to recognize others’ needs

and adapt their energy levels accordingly.

In particular, leaders with high energy levels need to be aware that this disposition can create tension with slower-paced people, especially those whom the leaders regard as slow-minded or uncommitted. Worse, these slower-paced individuals may then underperform, living down to the executive’s diminished expectations.⁷ As a senior executive from the finance sector told us: “Whenever I had to meet with [one unhurried colleague], he would absolutely suck the life out of me. I just tried to avoid dealing with him. But then we were mandated to work on the same cross-functional team and I realized that beneath that leisurely exterior was a very sharp mind. I’ve become much more accepting of his ways because of what he can bring to the table.”

Or you can be too introspective. Executives who are more internally focused often need to learn to behave like extraverts — to adopt behaviors that are more communicative, to give presentations and to socialize.

Constant communication can be draining for those who have some introverted tendencies. Take the example of Carol Bartz, the former CEO of Yahoo. She described herself as “kind of a borderline extrovert-introvert” in an interview with the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 2004. As Bartz told the *Chronicle*, “I recharge my batteries by getting a little alone time and gardening. ... Introverts refresh by having some time to themselves.”⁸

Executives who are both reserved and serious often wear solemn facial expressions. They may be given to frowning or pursing their lips. One remedy

for solemn-looking executives is to find an object that prompts them to think about their facial expression.

We suggest they buy a mug, perhaps with a humorous motto on it, to carry around with them. And this mug is a reminder: “What is your expression right now?” The idea is not to smile if you don’t feel like it — just to remember to relax your facial muscles. Relaxing (and smiling) has been shown to have a physiological impact, not only on the executive but also on colleagues, who tend to mirror the emotion.⁹

3. Openness: How Much Newness Is Too Much?

Openness includes people’s tendency to show intellectual curiosity, independence of judgment and big-picture orientation. Higher scores on these dimensions have value for leadership roles.¹⁰ But they don’t necessarily help the leader connect with others.

You can be too innovative or too complex. Speculating on alternative viewpoints and seeking additional perspectives can be frustrating for colleagues who are looking for clarity, consistency and direction. If the leader is easily drawn into “what if” discussions, it can be very unsettling. In the *Harvard Business Review*, Kevin Sharer, CEO and now chairman of Amgen, noted: “I’m fascinated with long-term strategic alternatives. ... I like to reflect on and talk about those options.” But Sharer has realized that when a CEO often discusses possible change, “it can be destabilizing to the organization.”

Leaders with this experimental orientation may need someone alongside them to keep them grounded. Sharer has learned to impose his own discipline: “I’ve decided that I need to look at these big-picture options two or three times a year and then put them away.”¹¹

Executives who possess a great deal of intellectual curiosity or creativity can also overwhelm others with the complexity or abstraction of what they are trying to communicate. They can end up confusing others rather than enlightening them. They must force themselves to simplify the message and to translate their thoughts into terms that others relate to.

Someone who struggled with overelaborate thinking is Cristóbal Conde, former CEO of SunGard Data Systems. In a *New York Times* article, he recalled a piece of advice he received: “A boss once told me: ‘Cris, you’re a smart guy, but that doesn’t mean that people can absorb a list of 18 things to do. Focus on a handful of things.’ Very constructive criticism, and the way I’ve translated that is, when I do reviews, everything is threes ... three positives and three things they should do differently.”¹²

In addition to highlighting the critical objectives, executives inclined to overcomplicate should adopt a coaching-oriented approach, whereby they check that others follow their meaning and have a chance to contribute.

Or you can be too conventional. Leaders at the more conformist end of the spectrum risk coming across as resistant to new ideas. In the words of a chief technology officer we worked with: “I came up through the manufacturing operations. And that suited my temperament. I’m a data guy. I insist on seeing the facts. But now I’m at a [senior] level where people are very willing to share their opinion and expect an opinion. So I’ve had to teach myself to get out of that conservative zone — and in part, I’ve done that by volunteering for task forces that give me more of an opportunity to see the big picture.”

The challenge for executives uncomfortable with ambiguity is to move when not all the information is available. Leaders understanding this tendency in themselves can work to

THE CURSE OF YOUR QUALITIES

Each of the Big Five personality dimensions consists of a cluster of traits — and those traits can be perceived as both positive and negative.

BIG FIVE DIMENSION		PERSONALITY TRAITS	CAN BE PERCEIVED AS
Need for Stability	High	Resilient, calm	Unconcerned, uninspiring
	Low	Reactive, excitable	Unstable, insecure
Extraversion	High	Sociable, assertive	Attention-seeking, domineering
	Low	Reserved, reflective	Aloof, self-absorbed
Openness	High	Creative, receptive	Unpredictable, unfocused
	Low	Pragmatic, data-driven	Closed-minded, dogmatic
Agreeableness	High	Compassionate, cooperative	Naïve, submissive
	Low	Competitive, challenging	Argumentative, untrustworthy
Conscientiousness	High	Persistent, driven	Stubborn, obsessive
	Low	Flexible, spontaneous	Sloppy, unreliable
No Strong Preferences (on all five dimensions)		Adaptable, moderate, reasonable	Unprincipled, inscrutable, calculating

RISKS AND REMEDIES

Moving up the hierarchy into new roles or environments, executives may find they need to play up or rein in different facets of their personality. What were strengths can become weaknesses.

BIG FIVE DIMENSION	KILLER QUALITY	RISKS OF THAT QUALITY	TIPS FOR SELF-DEVELOPMENT
Need for Stability	High: Too Fiery	•Liable to overreact; short-tempered	•Verbalize emotions. •Drain the “anger container.”
	Low: Too Composed	•Seem too laid back; overoptimistic	•Create a mental spreadsheet to highlight the negatives as well as the positives.
Extraversion	High: Too Assertive	•Domineering; can crush debate	•When talking, follow the “four sentence” rule. •Listen and show you have listened.
	High: Too Energetic	•Wearing for those who try to keep up; harsh view of those with low energy	•Reassure others that you don’t expect them to keep your pace. •Don’t assume people who are slow are also slow-minded.
	Low: Too Introspective	•Socializing is painful. •Serious facial expression can deflate people.	•Create time-outs to recharge. •Find an object that reminds you to relax your face.
Openness	High: Too Innovative	•Unsettling for followers who crave consistency; easily bored	•Find someone to keep you grounded. •Regulate your bouts of creativity.
	High: Too Complex	•Lose people with abstraction or multiple priorities	•Highlight the critical few objectives. •Start from the problem and move to the context, not vice versa.
	Low: Too Conventional	•Uncertainty-avoidant; unwilling to experiment without conclusive data	•Challenge yourself. •Do one thing each day that scares you.
Agreeableness	High: Too Considerate	•Perceived as naive, easy to manipulate, spineless	•Change your mind-set from “I want to be liked” to “I want to be perceived as fair.”
	Low: Too Competitive	•Perceived as ruthless, uncaring, self-promoting	•Remember to articulate what’s in it for others.
	Low: Too Watchful	•Perceived as political, calculating, untrustworthy	•Tell people about yourself to bond. •Use self-deprecation, including humor.
	Low: Too Rational	•Perceived as blunt, aggressive	•Stress the role you are playing. •Remember the packaging of the message.
Conscientiousness	High: Too Thorough	•Micromanagement inhibits subordinates and delays problem recognition. •Lose sight of the big picture	•Switch to coaching mode and ask questions, rather than making suggestions. •Invite subordinates to challenge your involvement in low-value-adding areas.
	High: Too Committed	•Burnout, work-life balance issues	•Start cutting off 15 minutes from the working day. •Break the “my time is expandable” mentality.
	Low: Too Decisive	•Hasty or seat-of-the pants decisions; too trusting of intuition	•Check the analytics. •Sleep on it. •Appoint a devil’s advocate on the team.

push themselves out of their comfort zone and build up their openness to new experiences.

4. Agreeableness: How Much Confrontation Is Too Much?

Agreeableness is a measure of the importance people place on getting along with others. On the other four dimensions of the Big Five, effective executives typi-

cally cluster more on one side of the continuum than the other. With agreeableness, there is no such pattern.¹³ The location of the majority varies sharply by national culture, by industry, by company culture and even by function.

To give an extreme example, our coaching work with investment bankers revealed a very low average score on agreeableness. And that is an advantage in an ultracompetitive environment. Executives

who score low on agreeableness provide edge and a results focus that is invaluable in business. They are also precious team members, as they are comfortable voicing criticism and disrupting groupthink.

You can be too rational, competitive and watchful. Executives who are tough-minded and direct tend to be unflinching in facing conflict and tough issues. As a senior executive from the luxury goods sector told us: “I’m a straight talker. I have no problem telling people that they messed up — and I’m always puzzled why people make such a big deal out of it. I mean, we’re all adults and we’re all trying to improve.” She has a point, but her failure to comprehend the discomfort felt by others could lead them to see her as blunt or aggressive.

For executives like this, coaching advice often revolves around the issue of how the comments are packaged. The goal is to make it clear that the critique relates to the idea, not the individual submitting it. There are various ways of softening criticism. Executives can take the edge off their remarks by drawing attention to the feedback-providing role they are playing. Using phrases such as “Let me play devil’s advocate for a moment” or “If I put on my critic’s hat” is one way to accomplish this. If it is hard to find a diplomatic way of saying what needs saying, executives can preface their comments with an acknowledgment that what follows “may seem harsh.”

Similarly, executives with a strong competitive streak can come across as ruthless, uncooperative or lacking in larger perspective. They may get results, but colleagues and subordinates are less likely to trust them. They hence have difficulty building up a strong network; that absence of peer support becomes critical as they reach senior levels. A plant manager in the high-tech sector told us: “When I started as a manager, I was pretty aggressive. I could really intimidate people. But that approach will only take you so far. I think I’ve gone from making my way by trying to be the smartest guy in the room — constantly picking faults in the arguments of others — to trying more to build on the input of others.”

Once he realized the discomfort he was creating for those on the receiving end, that executive changed the way he framed his feedback. Rather than laying into the person’s flawed logic, he developed a softer touch, explaining that the proposal was perhaps “not yet ready for prime time.” He also

worked to suppress his tendency to react to ideas with a sentence starting with the word “but.” Instead, he tried to begin his responses with “and,” which is more inclusive and constructive.

It can be helpful for leaders to be politically savvy and sensitive to the dynamics of influence within an organization. But leaders with a low need for agreeableness can also be too guarded and somewhat defensive, making it difficult for others to trust them. Consider the experience of a project director from the automobile industry: “By nature, I’m not the most open person,” he told us. “But I’ve worked on lots of projects and I’ve found that unless I share what I’m thinking, it’s very difficult to connect with new teams. They’re wary. So at the start of a project, I always tell them something about myself, including my family situation, and some of the things I struggle with. I also make a joke about being German. It kick-starts the relationship.”

Or you can be too considerate. Executives on the more agreeable end of the scale are both trusting and trustworthy. They are likely to promote collaboration and to be attentive to others’ opinions, development needs and well-being. But agreeable executives can have difficulty delivering negative feedback or making decisions that risk upsetting others. Take the example of Sue Murray, executive director of the George Foundation and former CEO of the National Breast Cancer Foundation. When asked about her greatest weaknesses in the *Age*, she replied: “I can be too nice when tough decisions need to be made, which is not helpful to anyone. It just prolongs the inevitable.”¹⁴

Highly agreeable executives must ask themselves: “Why do I have this need to be liked?” Of course, the answer may go deep into childhood, but posing the question at least launches the reflection process. More practically, we encourage these executives to switch mind-sets from “I want to be liked” to “I want to be perceived as fair.” Research by organizational behavior scholar Daan van Knippenberg and his colleagues has shown that fairness is the dominant concern when employees evaluate managers, not likability.¹⁵

5. Conscientiousness: How Much Focus Is Too Much?

Conscientiousness reflects the extent to which we want to structure and organize our lives. Drive, reli-

ability and persistence are important qualities for leaders, but they can prove dysfunctional if they are not properly channeled.

You can be too thorough. One risk for highly conscientious leaders is that their perfectionism can cause them to fuss over details while losing sight of the big picture. That can be a serious problem, as highlighted by the CEO of a family business we worked with. As he put it: “I have quite an appetite for details, so once I get to hear of a problem, I keep asking questions and I have difficulty letting go of it. That can distract me from the essentials. So I’m trying to be more selective about my deep involvement — but it’s a work in progress.”

Executives with this tendency need to ask themselves: “Is this a high-leverage activity — or could my time be better invested elsewhere?” They also need to authorize their direct reports to repeat this question whenever it seems like the executive is getting bogged down in time-wasting details. Perfectionism has another unfortunate consequence. Sensing that their boss is inclined to get too involved or to micromanage, employees may grow reluctant to flag issues. Perfectionist executives need to put on their coaching hats and switch to questioning mode, so that their input comes across as help, not control.

Beyond the professional harm that these preferences can cause, they can also wreak havoc in one’s private life. Highly conscientious leaders can become workaholics, obsessive in their pursuit of goals, raising the risk of burnout and poor work-life balance. They can also struggle in situations calling for flexibility. A supply chain director in the telecom sector told us: “I can get overly focused sometimes. I feel an intense responsibility for my area to the extent that I just lose balance — I work too hard, I neglect my health and my family. And, of course, the less time I spend with my family, the less I feel like I belong with them — and the more I throw myself into the work. So that’s a cycle I’m trying to break.”

An unhealthy commitment to work is not something executives can change overnight. But one approach executives who have this tendency can take is to cut back the working day by 15 minutes. Then, the following week, shave off another 15 minutes, and so on each week until you reach a target workday length.

Or you can make decisions too quickly. While some leaders can be inclined to overanalyze before

making up their minds, others realize that they tend to make decisions quickly, based on instinct. For example, William Green, chairman of Accenture, told the *New York Times* that he has learned to become more methodical and less “seat of the pants” in his decision-making style as he rose through the ranks: “I have purposely tried to get better grounding in the analytics behind the decision making and used that to check to see if there was a huge disconnect between what my instinct told me and what the analytics told me.”¹⁶

For executives low on decision-making caution, it can be helpful to appoint someone to play devil’s advocate — someone who has full license from the executive to question his or her snap decisions without negative career consequences.

Becoming Self-Aware

Several of the preceding examples suggest ways of managing psychological preferences. The inevitable starting point is self-awareness.

Without it, executives will find it hard to evolve or find coping strategies. In fact, a survey of 75 members of the Stanford Graduate School of Business Advisory Council rated self-awareness as the most important capability for leaders to develop.¹⁷ Executives need to know where their natural

PepsiCo CEO Indra Nooyi has said that she benefited from feedback from mentors.



inclinations lie in order to boost them or compensate for them. Self-awareness is about identifying personal idiosyncrasies — the characteristics that executives take to be the norm but actually represent the exception.

Sometimes self-awareness comes early in one's career, prompted by a comment from a trusted colleague or boss. In an article in *Fortune International*, Lauren Zalaznick, now chairman, Entertainment & Digital Networks and Integrated Media for NBC-Universal, recalled that the best advice she ever received was from her first boss, who told her: "Throughout your career, you're going to hear lots of feedback from show-makers and peers and employees and bosses. If you hear a certain piece of feedback consistently and you don't agree with it, it doesn't matter what you think. Truth is, you're being perceived that way."¹⁸

On her rise to the top, PepsiCo CEO Indra Nooyi has also benefited from constructive feedback: "I'm a pretty honest and outspoken person," she told the *Wall Street Journal Europe*. "So, you sit in a meeting and somebody presents a ... five-year plan. [Other executives] would say, 'You know, that's very inter-

esting. But maybe you could think about this slightly differently.' I just said, 'That's crap. This is never going to happen.' I'm sure they were all thinking that, but they were saying it in a much more gentle way. I'd come out of the meeting, and one of the guys would pull me aside and say, 'You could have said the thing slightly differently.'"¹⁹

Over the past two decades, companies have increased the opportunities for executives to gain insight into their personalities and receive feedback from multiple sources. These instruments can even be distributed to friends and family, who may be only too pleased to enlighten their loved ones on how they come across. And self-awareness is one of the most frequently cited outcomes of leadership coaching.²⁰

But some executives resist this process for a long time. Take the case of David Pottruck, the former CEO of Charles Schwab. Earlier in his career, he was summoned to his boss's office and told that his colleagues did not trust him. As Pottruck recalled in the *Harvard Business Review*, "That feedback was like a dagger to my heart. I was in denial, as I didn't see myself as others saw me. ... I had no idea how self-serving I looked to other people. Still, somewhere in my inner core the feedback resonated as true."²¹

Success in multiple roles is unlikely unless a leader can accept and overcome his or her blind spots. John Donaldson, former CEO of the Thomas Cook Group, testified to this in a book called *The Set-Up-to-Fail Syndrome*: "When I look back at the way I behaved when I was directing [one of the group's two business units], I am encouraged by the progress I have made. The journey is not over, but I've changed enough to say honestly that today, I would not employ a manager who behaves the way I did back then. If I was the CEO of the manager I was then, I think I'd fire myself!"²²

Prisoners of Our Personalities?

The objective is not to undergo a personality change. It is to be yourself, with more skill.²³ The point that comes across from many of the examples given in this article is that most successful leaders have had to work on themselves in order to manage or tone down potentially career-limiting traits. It required hard work and introspection. That is the bad news. The good news is that we are not prisoners of our personalities. Personality is about

Cisco CEO John Chambers has said that, initially, it was not easy for him to learn to be more collaborative.





In general, aspiring leaders need to become aware of their outlier tendencies and learn how they are perceived by others. Passion, hard work and intensity are vital traits for leaders, but those same traits can also be overwhelming. The lesson here is straightforward: The bundle of traits that work for you as a leader right now can become a source of problems on short notice.”

preferences — preferred ways of behaving — and we can behave in ways that run contrary to our personality. Indeed, we all have to do this from time to time. Some people do it exceedingly well.

Take the case of Richard Branson, who has dressed up in silly costumes to publicize the Virgin Group he founded. He told the *Independent*: “Every single time I am asked to do this sort of thing ... and make a spectacle of myself, there is always something in the pit of my stomach that turns.”²⁴ Branson told *Strategy + Business* that his underlying personality bears little relation to his flamboyant public persona, but that he has learned to play the role: “Before we launched the airline, I was a shy and retiring individual who couldn’t make speeches and get out there. ... I had to train myself into becoming more of an extrovert.”²⁵

Branson’s example shows to what extent it is possible to expand our repertoire of behaviors beyond our underlying preferences. But such efforts take their toll. They are only sustainable if the person can figure out how to recover and recharge. Otherwise, there is a danger of burnout.

Sometimes, an executive who expands his or her repertoire of behaviors may allow new group dynamics to emerge as well. When Cisco’s top management team decided to adopt a more collaborative approach, it was CEO John Chambers who found it trickiest to adapt. Accustomed to dominating meetings, he could not help stepping in to provide the answer. “It was hard for me at first to learn to be collaborative,” he told the *Harvard Business Review*. “But when I learned to let go and give the team the time to come to the right conclusion, I found they made just as good decisions, or even better. ... I had to develop the patience to let the group think.”²⁶

It is worth investing effort into developing one’s coaching skills. We mentioned this remedy in connection with the psychological tendencies to be too complex or too thorough. But it also applies to execu-

tives who may be too assertive or too competitive. The behavioral skills associated with coaching (asking questions, active listening, making suggestions, providing feedback) counteract several excesses simultaneously.

For executives who do not feel up to making such behavioral changes, self-awareness helps in two other ways. First, it allows us to share our particular foibles and shortcomings. This makes it easier for people to read us and to help us keep our extreme behaviors in check.

Second, self-awareness alerts us to activities and situations we are likely to find difficult. The simplest antidote is to find a complementary person who can act as a counterweight. If you tend to be disorganized, find someone who is meticulous; if you tend toward the big picture, find a pragmatist; if you tend to be impulsive, find someone more risk averse; if you tend to be too trusting or open, find someone more skeptical or politically astute. At a joint coaching session we held with two executives from the packaging industry, a divisional director and his deputy, the former observed: “Looking at our scores, I can see how he complements me on several dimensions where I am a bit extreme — which may be something I sensed when I chose him [as deputy] and certainly explains some of our fights. I guess, the takeaway for me, is that those fights maybe save me from myself.”

Consider, too, the example of the late Steve Jobs. According to an article in *Psychology Today*, he made little effort to curb his salient personality traits — narcissism, aesthetic sensibility, imagination, perfectionism, obsessive nature, faith in intuition — and indeed leveraged them to create innovative and visually pleasing tech products for the masses.²⁷ But he picked alongside him at Apple a partner capable of attenuating the potential liabilities of his own extreme personality. Tim Cook, Apple’s CEO since August 2011, shares Jobs’ intensity and workaholic tendencies. But in other respects he was a perfect foil.

The most common observation about Cook, according to an article in *Fortune* called “Apple: The Genius Behind Steve,” has been how temperamentally different he was from Jobs.²⁸ Cook is pragmatic, consistent and calm, and he never raises his voice. Jobs, of course, was none of the above — and he knew it.

In general, aspiring leaders need to become aware of their outlier tendencies and learn how they are perceived by others. Passion, hard work and intensity are vital traits for leaders, but those same traits can also be overwhelming. The lesson here is straightforward: The bundle of traits that work for you as a leader right now can become a source of problems on short notice. Where personality is concerned, executives must learn to adapt — and to watch out for too much of a good thing.

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