

# **Executive Success: Leadership Behaviors That Separate the Best from the Rest**

By Helen Peters, M.A., and Robert Kabacoff, Ph.D.



## Executive Success: Leadership Behaviors That Separate the Best from the Rest

### The MRG® Leadership Model

The model is comprised of twenty-two specific dimensions of leadership behavior that are measured against six essential functions of the leadership role:

#### CREATING A VISION

- Conservative
- Innovative
- Technical
- Self
- Strategic

#### DEVELOPING FOLLOWERSHIP

- Persuasive
- Outgoing
- Excitement
- Restraint

#### IMPLEMENTING THE VISION

- Structuring
- Tactical
- Communication
- Delegation

#### FOLLOWING THROUGH

- Control
- Feedback

#### ACHIEVING RESULTS

- Management Focus
- Dominant
- Production

#### TEAM PLAYING

- Co-operation
- Consensual
- Authority
- Empathy

Recent surveys show that leadership is among the chief concerns of today's CEOs. The number of executive competencies required for success at the top of organizations has grown exponentially, becoming both more complex and more diverse in today's global economy. Talent – smart, sophisticated business people who are technically literate, globally astute, and operationally agile – has been identified as the most important organizational resource over the next 20 years.

Despite this premium on leadership excellence, management gurus, social scientists, and even senior executives themselves, continue to argue about exactly what makes certain leaders more effective than others. Much of this debate is based on interviews, anecdotes and personal observations rather than hard data. This article takes the discussion about executive effectiveness out of the realm of opinion and looks at what some of the most extensive and reliable data available today has to tell us about leadership effectiveness in the executive suite.

### The Research

The research questions were simple:

- ◆ Do the most effective senior executives approach the leadership role differently than their less effective counterparts?
- ◆ Are the leadership skills of great business managers the same or different from those of great people managers?

In order to answer these questions, the authors used data from Management Research Group®. MRG® is a global firm specializing in the creation of behavioral assessment instruments used for individual and organizational development. Their extensive data base includes information on the behavior, leadership style, and level of effectiveness of more than 400,000 managers worldwide. This study included 1048 senior executives (15% CEOs/Presidents and 85% Senior Vice Presidents) from a wide range of industries in North America (78% from the United States and 22% from Canada); 69% of the executives were male and 31% were female. Most were university graduates, and many had graduate degrees.

All of the executives in the study had been assessed in the last four years against MRG®'s leadership model (see sidebar) using the Leadership Effectiveness Analysis™ Questionnaire. The assessments were primarily completed in the context of ongoing organizational leadership development initiatives and executive coaching. The questionnaire consisted of two parts:

**Part A:** measures 22 specific leadership behaviors in six functional areas that define the managers' approach to developing a vision or direction for the organization, gaining the support of others for that vision, implementing the vision in organizational terms, and ensuring that things

happen according to the plan. The managers' orientation towards achieving results and their ability to work within a team environment were also measured.

**Part B:** measures observers' (bosses, peers, and direct reports) perceptions of the executive's business, people, and overall leadership effectiveness.

All 1,048 senior executives were evaluated (by self, bosses, peers, and direct reports) using the same questionnaire format. Peers and direct reports completed evaluations anonymously. Multivariate statistical techniques were used to determine the relative importance of the 22 leadership behaviors measured in Part A of the questionnaire on the three areas of perceived effectiveness measured in Part B of the questionnaire.

## Findings

The research yielded two important findings:

- ◆ **Contrary to many leadership models, this research demonstrates that one single approach to leadership will not make an executive effective in all aspects of his or her role. The behaviors that make executives successful in business terms are different than the behaviors that will make them successful in people terms.**
- ◆ **The five leadership behaviors most correlated with overall effectiveness are a combination of business-oriented and people-oriented approaches to the leadership role. Truly effective executives will have skills in both domains.**

The implications of these findings for individuals who are currently in executive roles, those preparing themselves for the executive suite, and professionals engaged in executive development and succession planning are discussed towards the end of this article.

## Business Skills

Measures of *business skills* included such elements as understanding financial issues, a general aptitude for business, and the ability to quickly get to the heart of issues. Leaders who are seen as more effective in their approach to business challenges demonstrate the following five leadership behaviors (in order of importance):

- ◆ Ability to analyze the future impact of their decisions and understand the effects of these decisions throughout the organization. This is far and away the most important attribute an executive can have in terms of business effectiveness.
- ◆ Are less likely to be influenced by those in authority. They may challenge the rules and even take on their bosses.

- ◆ Are comfortable being the one in charge and often seek opportunities to be influential. They know and accept the fact that they will be under constant scrutiny.
- ◆ Maintain a respectful distance from others. They are not overly extroverted, friendly, or informal.
- ◆ Clearly express their thoughts and ideas, keeping others informed of their expectations.

### People Skills

The effectiveness dimension called *people skills* includes such attributes as sensitivity to others, ability to work with a wide range of people, and the willingness to listen. The five most important attributes of executives seen as having great people skills (in order of importance) are:

- ◆ Have the ability to demonstrate an active concern for people and their needs and form close and supportive relationships with others. Statistically this is the most important behavior for leaders who are perceived as having strong people skills.
- ◆ Less likely to feel that they have the only answer to a question or to make independent judgments. They would tend to have a more inclusive decision-making style.
- ◆ Willing to seek input from others, rather than believing that they are the only one with answers to questions. They value the ideas and opinions of others and collect their input as part of their decision-making process.
- ◆ Avoid a primarily forceful, competitive approach to achieving their goals.
- ◆ Clearly express their thoughts and ideas, keeping others informed of their expectations. This attribute was shared with effective business skills (see Business Skills above).

**People Skills tapped into a whole new dimension of leadership that was not required to be seen as highly effective in terms of Business Skills.**

### Overall Effectiveness

Measures of overall effectiveness included items such as credibility with other management members and future potential for advancement. Executives who are seen as effective overall combined the leadership skills of both the most effective business leaders and the most effective people leaders. The five most important behaviors for general leadership effectiveness (in order of importance):

- ◆ Ability to analyze the future impact of their decisions and understand the impact of these decisions throughout the organization. This behavior was also one of the five most important for business skills.
- ◆ Can clearly express their thoughts and ideas, keeping others informed of their expectations. A behavior important for both business and people skills.
- ◆ Are less likely to feel that they have the only answer to a question or to make independent judgments. They would tend to have a more inclusive decision-making style. A key behavior for people skills.

- ◆ Feel comfortable in fast-changing environments. They are willing to take risks and to consider new and untested approaches. This behavior was not in the top five for business or people skills.
- ◆ Are willing to seek input from others, rather than believing that they are the only one with answers to questions. They value the ideas and opinions of others and collect their input as part of their decision-making process. This behavior was important for managers with good people skills.

**Understanding the impact of decisions, in terms of future outcomes and overall organizational implications, is the single most important characteristic of successful top executives.**

### **Considerations**

As compelling as the research reported in this article seems, there are caveats to its general application. First, the research describes trends over large groups of individuals and can serve as a general roadmap. For individual leaders, effective behavior is determined by the:

- ◆ Culture in which the individuals operate
- ◆ Organization in which they work
- ◆ Role they fill
- ◆ Unique context of their roles
- ◆ Individual's personal characteristics

Second, these are the attributes of successful leaders in top executive positions. The skills that help us to be effective in lower levels in the organization and earlier in our career are not necessarily the ones that lead to success at the top.

Finally, leadership impact in the current study is based on observer perceptions of effectiveness, rather than objective and quantifiable measures such as financial performance, performance against goals, customer satisfaction, and turnover rates.

### **Implications**

Effective and successful leadership at all levels of the organization requires a complex set of skills, carefully applied within a unique organizational context. Based on our research and experience, it is clear that there is no one right way to lead. However, as this study indicates, there are specific leadership approaches that can increase the probability of success in the executive suite.

For individuals who are currently in executive roles and want to be more effective, and for individuals who are preparing themselves for the executive suite, the findings of this research are significant. The findings can be used as a yardstick to measure current behavior, and from that, gaps in leadership capabilities can be assessed. New behaviors and approaches to leadership can be learned through experience, training, coaching and mentoring.

For professionals who are involved in executive development and succession planning, this research adds to their toolkit of assessment options and provides research-based approaches to creating winning executive teams.

**About the Authors:**

**Helen Peters**, M.A. heads the Leadership Development Practice at Torchiana, Mastrov and Sapiro. Prior to joining TMS, Helen was the Managing Director - EMEA, for Management Research Group®.

**Robert Kabacoff**, Ph.D. is V.P. of Research and Development, Management Research Group®.

**Results of other studies on leadership by these two authors can be found at [www.mrg.com](http://www.mrg.com).**

---

*Management Research Group® is a global firm specializing in the creation of behavioral assessment instruments used for individual and organizational development. For more information about MRG®, please go to [www.mrg.com](http://www.mrg.com).*

*Torchiana, Mastrov & Sapiro provides personalized leadership development and career transition programs to individuals and companies. Torchiana, Mastrov and Sapiro serves the San Francisco Bay Area through offices in San Francisco, San Ramon, and Santa Clara. Learn more about TMS at: [www.torchiana.com](http://www.torchiana.com), or contact TMS at:*

*San Ramon  
925-838-9720*

*San Francisco  
415-512-0771*

*Santa Clara  
408-844-8361*