



Cornell University  
ILR School

Cornell University ILR School  
**DigitalCommons@ILR**

---

Student Works

ILR Collection

---

Spring 2014

## What are the Characteristics that Separate High Potential Executives From the Rest?

Emmanuel Ameisen  
*Cornell University*

Chubing Hong  
*Cornell University, ch734@cornell.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/student>

Thank you for downloading an article from DigitalCommons@ILR.

**Support this valuable resource today!**

---

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the ILR Collection at DigitalCommons@ILR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Works by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@ILR. For more information, please contact [catherwood-dig@cornell.edu](mailto:catherwood-dig@cornell.edu).

If you have a disability and are having trouble accessing information on this website or need materials in an alternate format, contact [web-accessibility@cornell.edu](mailto:web-accessibility@cornell.edu) for assistance.

---

## What are the Characteristics that Separate High Potential Executives From the Rest?

### Abstract

One of the most active field in business oriented psychology has been concerning the matter of the identification of personality and behavioral traits that separate high performers from the rest of the pack. Which characteristics seem to be the most effective in predicting an executive's performance? How can we precisely define them? Which ways allow us to detect them easily? The effective identification of the predominant traits that are common to high performance executives allow for an easier way to detect potential for talent and promotion, and thus improves greatly the company's competitiveness.

### Keywords

human resources, high potential employees, performance measurements

### Comments

#### Suggested Citation

Ameisen, E. & Hong, C. (2014). *What are the characteristics that separate high potential future executives from the rest?* Retrieved [insert date] from Cornell University, ILR School site:

<http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/student/57>

#### Required Publisher Statement

Copyright by the authors.

ILRHR6640

Case #1

Emmanuel Ameisen and Chubing Hong

March 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### RESEARCH QUESTION

Identify characteristics that separate high potential future executives from the rest and that are not easily discovered through classic performance measurements, define these characteristics precisely, and if possible find practical ways to detect them.

### INTRODUCTION

One of the most active field in business oriented psychology has been concerning the matter of the identification of personality and behavioral traits that separate high performers from the rest of the pack. Which characteristics seem to be the most effective in predicting an executive's performance? How can we precisely define them? Which ways allow us to detect them easily? The effective identification of the predominant traits that are common to high performance executives allow for an easier way to detect potential for talent and promotion, and thus improves greatly the company's competitiveness.

### THE PERSONALITY TRAITS

A lot of different employee characteristics have been under scrutiny to see if they are indicators of performance, throughout all of the studies on the matter, a few of those seem to be particularly relevant. These characteristics, which relate to strong leadership traits, are the ones that predict most effectively the performance of executives, and are each defined precisely in the next section.

### PRECISE DEFINITION

#### **Cooperative Leadership**

Cooperative leaders are uniters; they bring those around them together, they believe in the ability of others to exceed expectations through teamwork, and they set a strong positive example for those they supervise (Gachter, Nosenzo, Renner, & Sefton, 2012). They disambiguate uncertainty and build teams around them to mitigate risk (Wikipedia, 2013). "He or she is someone on whom people... in the organization model themselves" (Drucker, 2004). In an experiment (Gachter, Nosenzo, Renner, & Sefton, 2012), researchers find that groups perform best when led by those who are cooperatively inclined; cooperative leaders contribute more than non-cooperative leaders even after controlling for optimism about the collaborative nature of followers.

#### **Cultural Leadership**

Culture, according to (Schein, 1986), is ultimately about the control of behavior. Tom Barrett, president of the Midwest and Southeast regions of SIAA, Inc., points out that good leadership in the health care

industry creates an environment where everyone strives to put clients or prospects in a better place than where they were found (Barrett, 2012). This kind of positive customer experience leads to ‘a unique and memorable contact with your agency.’

(Yang, 2007) thinks that controlling processes are concerned with setting the norms of behavior, values and beliefs that the leaders wish to encourage in their subordinates. Organizational culture may be either an advantage or a disadvantage for the organization. When an organizational culture is out of step with the wider cultural environment of its employees, it becomes an obstacle to staff members effectively pursuing their tasks.

### **Vulnerable Leadership**

‘Vulnerable’ is defined in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as ‘being exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally.’ Many people associate vulnerability with weakness by definition. In reality, vulnerability can be a strength. Every successful leader has some degree of vulnerability. The greatest leaders have the self-awareness to recognize it in themselves. They also recognize that showing their vulnerability is a sign of courage and strength (Williams, 2013). Vulnerable leaders are those who ask the views of those lower in rank, admit when they are wrong and apologize in public, actively seek out feedback from direct reports, ask customers for honest feedback on their service, tell colleagues to hold them accountable if they don’t deliver, and supplement their own weaknesses by surrounding themselves with people who are strong in the areas where they are not (Symanowitz, 2013).

### **Extraversion**

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines extraversion as ‘the act, state, or habit of being predominantly concerned with and obtaining gratification from what is outside the self’. Extraverts are usually outgoing people, who are very at ease when it comes to maintaining both personal and professional relationships. This proves to be a strength not only directly in the workplace, but also through a more stable circle of friends, allowing the executive to bear stress more easily. According to (Judge, & Bono, 2004), out of all the traits of the popular Big 5 personality framework (Optimism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness), extraversion ‘was the strongest and most consistent correlate of transformational leadership’.

## **DETECTION**

While there is a lot of research on the correlation between traits and performance, very little exists about the practical implementation of methods to identify those traits. As such the only sensible recommendation is peer-assessment, especially for the first three traits. When it comes to extraversion, a lot of psychological tests can provide precise measurements.

## **CONCLUSION**

Out of all the characteristics one can isolate from employees, a few traits come out as reliable predictors of future executive performance, the successful identification of these traits will allow for the effective selection of high potential executives, and thus help with the succession planning process. Thus, a performance appraisal of executives should include methods to test the previously mentioned qualities, whether through a review of the past year’s performance, or psychological tests; since these are the key factors that separate high potential future executives from the rest.

### Works Cited

1. Barrett, T. (2012, April). 10 Characteristics of a Leader: The Return of the Hard Market Stresses Need for Leadership. *American Agent & Broker*, 26-27.
2. Drucker, P. F. (2004). *The Daily Drucker*. New York: Collins Business.
3. Gachter, S., Nosenzo, D., Renner, E., & Sefton, M. (2012). Who Makes a Good Leader?
4. Cooperativeness, Optimism, and Leading-by-Example. *Economic Inquiry*, 50 (4), 953-967.
5. Schein, E. H. (1986). What You Need to Know about Organizational Culture. *Training and Development Journal*, 40 (1), 30-33.
6. Symanowitz, C. (2013, July 25). Vulnerable Leaders Make Great Leaders. *FINWEEK*, 44-45.
7. Wikipedia. (2013, April 4). Modes of Leadership. Retrieved March 6, 2014, from Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modes\\_of\\_leadership](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modes_of_leadership)
8. Williams, D. K. (2013, July 18). The Best Leaders are Vulnerable. Retrieved March 03, 2014, from Forbes: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/davidkwilliams/2013/07/18/the-best-leaders-are-vulnerable/>
9. Yang, J.-T. (2007). Knowledge Sharing: Investing Appropriate Leadership Roles and Collaborative Culture. *Tourism Management*, 28 (2), 530-543.
10. Judge, & Bono (2004). Personality and Transformational and Transactional Leadership: A Meta-Analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 89, No. 5, 901–910.