

# Is there a correlation between Personality and Leadership? A summary of the main theories

## ¿Existe una correlación entre Personalidad y Liderazgo? Un resumen de las principales teorías

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### Abstract

Through this article, it is intended to carry out a bibliographic review of some of the academic and organizational research focused on leadership from the Twentieth Century to today. The purpose of this review is to identify whether a correlation exists between effective leadership and the different personality traits that characterize the leader. Research about the relationship between personality and leadership have been increasing since the Big five model emergence. However, findings have shown heterogeneous results regarding which trait-extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience- explains a transformational, transactional, or passive-avoidant leadership style.

**Keywords:** leadership, transformational leadership, transactional leadership, passive-avoidant leadership, personality, Big Five.

### Resumen

En el presente artículo se desarrolla una revisión bibliográfica de investigaciones académicas en el campo de la psicología organizacional; específicamente, se incluyen algunos estudios de liderazgo, realizados desde el siglo pasado hasta hoy. El propósito de esta revisión es identificar si existe una correlación entre el liderazgo eficaz y los distintos rasgos de personalidad que caracterizan al líder. Cabe anotar que las investigaciones sobre la relación entre personalidad y liderazgo se han incrementado a partir del surgimiento del modelo de los cinco grandes. Sin embargo, los hallazgos han sido heterogéneos en lo que respecta a cuál rasgo (extraversión, amabilidad, conciencia, neuroticismo y apertura a la experiencia) explica un estilo de liderazgo transformacional, transaccional o pasivo- evitativo.

**Palabras clave:** liderazgo, liderazgo transformacional, liderazgo transaccional, liderazgo pasivo-evitativo, personalidad, Modelo de los cinco grandes.

## Introduction

Nowadays, we face an uncertain, volatile, and ever-changing context where uncertainty is the only constant. More than ever, the role of the leader is essential to face the organizational challenges of the 21st century and the digital era.

Leadership is a process that has sparked special interest among individuals and in the organizational environment. This fascination likely stems from the fact that the leadership process is still a mystery. The leader is not only a conqueror of great organizational battles but is also responsible for inspiring those who follow. The leader becomes a kind of savior and hero who is emulated, which is why the traits, attributes, or characteristics of effective leaders throughout history have received attention in organizational studies. Numerous authors have related types of leadership to types of personality that leaders possess versus those who do not. Among the best-known personality theories is the Big Five theory, which has shown a positive relationship with leadership, particularly with transformational and transactional leadership.

This article discusses the main leadership theories and their relationship with The Big Five model, in order to propose certain traits that can contribute to the good performance of the leader's role.

### **Is there a correlation between Personality and Leadership? A summary of the main theories**

Establishing the relationship of leadership and organizational performance and their effects on the organization's behavior has been the subject of many studies, which have moved from defining characteristics that "good" leaders have or should have, to situational, contingency, transformational and charismatic leadership's proposals (D'Alessio, 2010). Numerous studies have reported that leadership has a direct relationship with the results of the organizational behavior's system and therefore in the goals' achievement, employee satisfaction with their work, personal and professional development of employees (Snow-Andrade, 2023; Strang Kuhnert, 2009), affective-commitment (Gurbuz et al., 2022), and organizational commitment (Nurjanah et al., 2023). Leaders emerge from the groups and effectively influence the group from their ability to attract or influence their followers (Colbert et al., 2012). People, as well as groups, describe basic behaviors that they regularly perform, which become defining features of their personality (Hofmann & Jones, 2005). Therefore, researchers have sought to establish whether personality traits have a relationship that allows to predict leadership and its effects (Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009).

The Trait Theory of leadership suggested that personal characteristics determine a leader, as well as the relationship with his/her followers and the performance obtained by the team. According to Colbert et al. (2012), the theory proposed that certain traits make leaders different from those who are not. Besides, Judge et al. (2002) stated that the Trait Theory assumes that leadership depends on the qualities of the leader. On the other hand, Strang & Kuhnert (2009) suggested that personality has been used as a variable that explains leadership probably because behavior is a function of personality, which can be defined by features. These ones are consistent in adulthood, and thus allow to propose models of future behavior. People, as well as groups, describe basic behaviors that they regularly perform, which become defining features of their personality (Hofmann & Jones, 2005). Therefore, researchers have sought to establish whether personality traits have a relationship that allows to predict leadership and its effects. Oreg & Berson (2018) and Walumbwa & Schaubroeck (2009, as cited in Pervin, 1990), who defined personality as: "the personal attributes of the individual, which once formed are relatively stable over time across situations" (p. 241). Besides, it could be observed by traits that frame the way

a person behaves. “Personality includes the innate characteristics of the individual and the skills acquired later. In other words, it constitutes the biological dimension and the social dimension of the individual’s psycho-social existence” (Kumcu & Çentinel, 2022, pp. 274).

In relation to leadership, Reichard et al. (2011) described the history of the theory of traits and enunciated that “Bingham defined a leader as a person who possesses the greatest number of desirable traits of personality and character” (p. 471). The notion that leadership emerges in people with certain characteristics or traits, and that these traits, in turn, determine the organization’s performance, gained significant prominence in studies of this variable during the first half of the twentieth century (Colbert et al., 2012; Reichard et al., 2011)

From the Trait Theory, studies of the first half of the Twentieth Century were focused on determining if there was or not any relationship between all possible personality characteristics or traits and leadership. A lot of traits were evaluated in several studies, which considered multiple conceptualizations about the meaning of each personality characteristic and multiple forms of measurement. However, the results obtained in the research allowed to establish that the relationship between traits of personality and leadership were inconsistent (Colbert et al., 2012), which supposed an opportunity to discussion as well as to the development of new proposals that eventually led to rejecting the Trait Theory (Resick et al., 2009). One of the biggest problems in studies related to personality and leadership developed during that time was the lack of structure to describe personality, leaving an extensive range of features that were investigated under different concepts (Judge et al., 2002). Johnsen et al. (2009) enunciated that after the critical review made by Stogdill in 1948 and Mann in 1959 concerning the inconsistencies in the results of the studies, personality ceased to be considered in studies about leadership (Peterson et al., 2003).

During the second half of the Twentieth Century, new proposals about leadership emerged. Among the best-known theories in the academic world are those that state that leaders act according to their contexts. The situational model proposed that depending on how the relationship between the leader and followers is given, and the follower’s level of orientation to fulfill the responsibilities, the leader can use a certain style of leadership. On the other hand, the contingency model proposes that the level of participation in decision-making for solving problems in leadership depends on the degree of concern on the quality requirements of the decision and information for making the decision. Here, it is also important to consider the followers’ acceptance of the decision. Although both models are based on the situation, the first one is known as the situational model. Considered as prescriptive, it was proposed by Hersey and Blanchard in 1969, based on the proposals of Tannenbaum and Schmidt in 1958, and Blake and Mouton in 1964. The second one is identified as the contingency model. It is considered as deductive (D’Alessio, 2010) and normative (Yukl & Gardner, 2020). This model was proposed by Vroom and Yetton in 1973. However, some authors refer to these proposals as those framed in situational or contingency models, without discriminating between them. This can be illustrated through the following expression of Johnsen et al. (2009): “Hersey & Blanchard (1969) described a contingency model of leadership which leader attributes interact in important ways with situational features” (p. 2213).

Studies about leadership conducted since 1969 focused on the pursuit of knowledge of the different behaviors of the leader in different situations, until 1978 when Burns developed the concept of transformational leadership through a qualitative analysis of various world leaders. The proposal was complemented by Bass in 1985, and since then it is part of the Full-Range of Leadership Model (Coluccio et al., 2020; Deinert et al., 2015; Schyns & Sanders, 2007). This theory proposes the existence of three styles of leadership (transformational, transactional, and passive-avoidant leadership). From their emergence, these styles have been the focus of a lot of

research, to the point that this model became the most studied in the late Twentieth Century, as pointed out by Lowe & Gardner (2000, as cited in Pillai et al. 2003). It is important to state that parallel to the Transformational Leadership's emergence, the Charismatic Leadership was presented. Although some authors have discussed the differences between these two proposals, there is a great similarity and convergence among both (Felfe & Schyns, 2006). In fact, their concepts were used by Ehrhart & Klein (2001) and Hoogh et al. (2005) as interchangeable, and according to de Vries (2008), each of those leadership styles "has markedly different personality profile" (p. 411).

Recently, the study of the relationship between personality and leadership has continued. The above due to the proposed frame of reference for personality, called the five-factor model of personality (Mlinarević et al., 2022; Oreg & Berson, 2018). Hoogh et al. (2005) established that in recent years the interest in the study of personality traits of effective leadership has come back as result of the progress achieved with the proposals of the charismatic or transformational leadership, which established predictors for leadership styles. Besides, due to the consensus at the academy on adjusting the proposed Big Five of personality, it has been possible to minimize the ambiguity in determining the relationship between the variables (Lamm et al., 2021; Optimizing authentic leadership: Why the big five personality traits are significant, 2022). On top of that, Krishnan (2018) considers the Big Five as the "well-known and most validated model of personality" (p. 16). All the above have led to increase the number of studies regarding leadership and personality in recent years (Lucifora & Repetto, 2021).

The Big Five model provides a categorization and classification of personality based on many empirical studies. It has been used generally in different cultures and ways of data collection (Cable & Judge, 2003; Le Sante et al., 2021). The five-factor model is set for an exploration of personality while allowing its systematization and measurement. Many personality researchers have explored the construction of other models but have come to the same dimensions of the five-factor model, with some small changes in the degrees of efficiency (Strang & Kuhnert, 2009). The taxonomy of personality proposed in the Big five model defines that its basic structure is composed of five factors: (a) Extraversion or tendency to be outgoing, assertive and expressive (b) Agreeableness or tendency to be friendly, adaptable, cooperative and treatable (c) Conscientiousness or trend towards achievement orientation, organization, focusing on the task and being reliable (d) Neuroticism or tendency to exhibit anxiety, insecurity and hostility associated with low emotional adjustment; it is the opposite to emotional stability or tendency to be secure, emotionally adjusted and calm, and (e) Openness to experience or willingness to be imaginative, artistic, independent, maverick and unconventional (Cable & Judge, 2003; Hassam et al., 2017; Hoogh, et al., 2005; Judge et al., 2002; Le Sante, et al., 2021; Snow-Andrade, 2023; Strus & Ciecuch, 2021; Xia et al., 2021)

Investigations that have used the Big five model have shown that personality is related to job performance and that several personality factors serve as a source to examine the predictors of effective leadership (Ayub et al., 2019; Dababneh et al., 2021; Eshet & Harpaz, 2021; Harzer et al., 2021; Judge et al., 2002; Kumari et al., 2022; Lan et al., 2021; Snow-Andrade, 2023; Wihler et al., 2022; Zell & Lesick, 2021) and knowledge sharing and innovation (Vo et al., 2023). According to meta-analysis made by Judge et al. (2002), extraversion was the trait with the strongest correlation with leadership, followed by conscientiousness and openness to experience (Snow-Andrade, 2023). Neuroticism shows a negative relationship and agreeableness was the least important trait concerning leadership. Now, the complete Big five model explained 16 percent of the variance in leader effectiveness, which means that it can be predicted from personality traits when these are organized under the five-factor model (Hoogh, et al., 2005; Snow-Andrade, 2023).

Related to the leadership orientation or behaviors, Cogliser et al. (2012) concluded that agreeableness and conscientiousness were related positively to task-oriented and relationship-oriented leadership in virtual teams. However, the longitudinal study by Emery et al. (2013) found that extraversion, openness to experience, and conscientiousness were positive related to task-oriented and relationship-oriented leadership, while agreeableness was positive related to relationship-oriented leadership.

On the other hand, studies have succeeded in identifying relationships between the Big Five model's features and transformational and transactional leadership (Arévalo-Avecillas et al., 2019; Arvey, et al., 2006; Ayub et al., 2019; Brandt & Laiho, 2022; Hoogh, et al., 2005; Judge et al., 2006; Judge & Bono, 2000; Lopez-Perry, 2020; Simic et al., 2022; Taraza & Anastasiadou, 2019; Xia et al., 2021). The results of the study by Judge & Bono (2000) established that agreeableness showed a greater relationship with the transformational leadership's behavior, followed by extraversion and openness to experience. Besides, there were no values regarding neuroticism and conscientiousness, which demonstrated the existence of a relationship with this style of leadership. Subsequently, Rubin et al. (2005) found similar results, concluding that agreeableness, but not extraversion, is a significant predictor of transformational leadership. Deinert et al. (2015) developed a meta-analysis in order to study the different relationships between the features of the Big five model and the sub-dimensions of transformational leadership. In this analysis, agreeableness obtained a positive relationship with idealized influence, inspirational motivation, and individualized consideration, but not with intellectual stimulation; neuroticism obtained a nonsignificant positive relationship with inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation; extraversion was positively correlated to idealized influence, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation. However, it did not show a relationship with individualized consideration; openness to experience was positively correlated with all subdomains, while conscientiousness was positively correlated with the entire construct of transformational leadership. Regarding the last factor, there was found no relationship with idealized influence and individualized consideration. Finally, it was negatively correlated with inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation.

On the other hand, Arévalo-Avecillas et al. (2019) found that agreeableness did not have a statistically relationship with transformational leadership, while domains such as extraversion and conscientiousness were the most important factors in predicting leadership style, and openness to experience has a positive and statistically significant relationship with transformational leadership style. Finally, the domain of agreeableness did not have a statistically significant effect on transformational leadership styles. Likewise, López-Perry (2020) concluded in their study that transformational leaders possess excellent emotional stability, are sociable, open to new experiences, achievement-oriented, and considerate towards others.

The results of the studies have been criticized due to low correlations obtained and the differences between them. Some authors state that the reasons for such differences can be due to the fact the Big five model is a broad construction of the personality and there is no total agreement on the names assigned to each factor (Grant & Bateman, 2000). Others associate inconsistencies to self-report bias or situational differences for each study. For the first, some proposals have been made. One of them seek to implement the six-factor model, which proposes a change in the meaning of the factors- changing the neuroticism for the emotional factor and including the honesty/Humility factor- (Schyns & Sanders, 2007). To avoid the self-reported bias, some authors have implemented the Big five model by an observer, partner, follower, or relative (Colbert et al., 2012; Vries, 2012). For the differences in situations or context between studies, the features' activation theory has been gaining strength in recent years. It states that personality traits require significant situations that activate them, therefore it proposes conducting research to determine the relationship between personality

traits and leadership in different types of situations (Hoogh, et al., 2005; Ng et al., 2008). In fact, the relevance of the Big- five model on leadership research is moderated by contextual and methodological variables (Bergner et al., 2015).

In conclusion, since the beginning of the studies on leadership, researchers have sought to determine the characteristics that define an effective leader and those that differentiate him/her from other people. This fact initially led scholars to study personality traits. However, the results were inconclusive and showed inconsistencies, which generated a change in the approach and a decreasing of research focused on personality and leadership. However, over time and thanks to the emergence of the five-factor model and the full range leadership theory, the study has been retaken. The latest research results have shown a significant relationship between personality traits and leadership (Damti & Hochman, 2022) -specifically with transformational leadership (Alessa, 2021; López-Perry, 2020)- as well as the broadly impact these traits have on people's behavior and decision-making in the organizational realm (Damti & Hochman, 2022). However, it is necessary to deepen these studies, considering the changing situations in organizations, where personality traits are activated.

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