

The **BIG SIX**  
Leadership Competencies

*By Bruce Griffiths*

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## About this series

Depending on the model you use, dozens of leadership competencies have been identified. But research shows that six are essential for exceptional leadership. This series was first printed as a series of columns in a monthly publication providing leaders and executives with best practices in their profession. ©2010 Organization Systems International. Reprinted with permission, RFG Media 2010.

## About the author

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## About Organization Systems International

For three decades OSI has delivered client success with a high-performance approach designed to enhance occupational relationships, improve operational efficiency and sustain customer relationships. Each member of its award-winning team brings a history of experience, passion and professionalism to help develop working solutions for organizations. Specific areas of expertise include: competency modeling, multi-rater (360) surveys, leadership learning programs, executive team building, leadership selection (tests, interviews, simulations/assessment centers), executive coaching, and strategic planning. For more information call 858.455.0923 or visit [www.orgsysint.com](http://www.orgsysint.com).

# Defining the ‘Right Stuff’ of Leadership

Let’s start with a common hiring scenario. After a recent resignation, your organization is interviewing for a new operations manager. The decision-makers assemble to compare notes on the candidates they’ve interviewed. “I think Susan has the right stuff for this position,” one says. “She was poised and radiated confidence when I asked difficult questions.” Another speaks up: “I think John fits the bill. He’s energetic and really seems to be a people person.” A third interviewer prefers Bill because of his “street smarts and technical knowledge.”

These opinions represent a lack of understanding or even a common vocabulary about what it really takes to effectively manage and lead. The ensuing discussion is likely to become an unproductive test of wills as the interviewers lobby for their favorite candidate. To prove this point, imagine asking the interviewers to independently record and then share their definition of effective leadership. Chances are you’ll get as many answers as there are interviewers! Never fear, though: There is a solution to this confusion.

## The competency model of leadership

Over time, our definitions of what constitutes good leadership have evolved; the accepted standard is now the language of *competencies*. A single competency is defined as a cluster of behaviors representing one facet of what’s needed to perform a job. For example, composure is frequently cited as a personal competency that is important to many positions. A cluster of behaviors that demonstrate composure include:

- Showing patience
- Responding calmly to stressful circumstances
- Demonstrating control of emotions

Having, and using, this kind of common vocabulary is especially vital in judging candidates for complex, cognitive jobs involving managing and leading.

The core concept of a *behavioral characterization* of a facet of competence has been fundamental to the language of competency since someone first articulated the notion that the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior (especially more *recent* behavior and in a similar *context*).

Here’s the basic idea: How much do you really care about what candidates tell you about their underlying motivation, values, attributes and even training compared to how they express these through their accomplishments and performance? How much can we really know about what is going on beneath the surface, compared to what we see in their current and recent actions?

## The Big Six

While most competency models contain several dozen individual competencies, there is a growing body of evidence that points to a subset of competencies that are absolutely essential to exceptional performance in managerial/leadership roles. Using these competencies to judge candidates (as well as for professional development) can be a powerful tool in ensuring that the best managers and leaders populate your organization.

Using our Polaris® Competency Model (also called the Career Compass), we’ve assessed thousands of high-performing leaders at more than 70 different organizations of all sizes and in many different markets. We’ve identified six competencies that the best leaders all have in common:

1. Relationship Building/Sensitivity (emotional intelligence)
2. Problem Solving & Decision Making (creative analysis and good judgment)
3. Influence (accumulation and skillful use of power)
4. Drive/Energy (passion to perform)
5. Organizing & Planning (being efficient and focusing energy on the right thing)
6. Communications Cluster (clear, frequent information in the right medium)

It’s important to note that these “Big Six” assume that a candidate already possesses technical and industry expertise. These “hard” skills are relatively easy to assess and validate; it is the “soft” skills represented in the Big Six that really define exceptional performance. In fact, it’s an axiom among human resources professionals that we tend to hire for the hard skills but fire for the soft skills.

In the next sections you’ll find tips on how to use the Big Six to evaluate candidates—and for your own personal career development.

## Focusing in on the ‘Big Six’

Research shows the following six competencies are essential for exceptional leadership.

1. Relationship Building/Sensitivity (emotional intelligence)
2. Problem Solving & Decision Making (creative analysis and good judgment)
3. Influence (accumulation and skillful use of power)
4. Drive/Energy (passion to perform)
5. Organizing & Planning (being efficient and focusing energy on the right thing)
6. Communications Cluster (clear, frequent information in the right medium)

# It's All About Relationships

Recently, I had the pleasure of attending the Linkage Conference for organizational development practitioners in Chicago. One of the highlights was listening to Warren Bennis, Ph.D., distinguished professor of business administration at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. Widely considered the world's leading expert on leadership, he began his talk by noting that in his six decades of studying the topic, he could draw just two unassailable conclusions. The entire audience shifted to the edge of their seats, pens in hand, to record what he had to say:

*"First, leadership makes a tremendous difference."*

Isn't this obvious? Not necessarily, if you judge the process by which organizations often haphazardly select and develop leaders. Tom Peters, noted speaker and co-author of *In Search of Excellence*, said it best: "A good leader doesn't just marginally improve a team's performance, a good leader can add an order of magnitude to a team's results." All too often, organizations—and leaders themselves—dramatically underestimate the impact that leadership, good or bad, makes.

*"Second, leadership is about relationships."*

This also seems obvious but again offers insight. Too often, leadership is presented as an intellectual exercise, with managers told to analyze a situation and then react with a scripted set of behaviors. But effective leaders are able to connect with their followers on an emotional level that comes more from the heart than the head—their "EQ," or emotional intelligence, contrasted to their "IQ."

EQ is a harder concept to nail down than IQ. While there is no single number or measure that wraps it up neatly, exceptional leaders with a high level of emotional intelligence do have common attributes:

- They understand that nurturing productive relationships is a primary driver for their success.
- They like interacting with people and are good at it.
- They devote appropriate time and energy to establishing and maintaining networks.
- They value and respect the concerns of others, and this compassion translates into behaviors that communicate empathy toward others, respect for the individual and appreciation of diversity among team members.
- They initiate contacts readily and maintain them over time. They leverage these relationships to facilitate business transactions.

## Defining Emotional Intelligence

Research shows there are six subsets of competencies that are essential for exceptional leadership. This section is a particularly elusive one: Relationship Building/Sensitivity, or emotional intelligence, sometimes referred to as "EQ." Unlike IQ, EQ is not defined as a single score; it's a combination of competencies that make you "people smart," not in a manipulative way, but in a genuine liking and concern for others.

Leaders with high levels of emotional intelligence:

- Recognize the importance of relationships.
- Devote energy to cultivating relationships.
- Enjoy being around people.
- Show empathy toward others.
- Consider others' feelings.
- Seek diverse perspectives.
- Maintain broad internal and external networks of business relationships.
- Leverage relationships to facilitate business transactions.

### Can you improve your EQ?

Our studies show that managers believe acquiring skill and knowledge in Relationship Building/Sensitivity can be daunting (especially if you are naturally disposed against it)—and with good reason. This is a competency that should definitely be on a list of required criteria when you select a leader, since it is so challenging to develop.

To ensure that a candidate qualifies for a leadership role, look for trends in his or her history that indicate a preference for teams and community. If you're using the best practice technique of behavioral episode interviewing (i.e., asking candidates to describe specific situations in which they've been successful or unsuccessful with interpersonal relations), use the interview to explore situations in which they've been in conflict with others or had to deliver bad news. These critical incidents can reveal comfort and competence in these difficult situations.

If you are trying to develop this competency in yourself, remember the saying "mind-set before skill set." That is, your disposition and ingrained attitudes are more important than skills that can be learned. You'll need to reflect on your thoughts and feelings about others. For instance, what motivates you in interpersonal situations? If you tend to

distrust people, why? There are many reasons to value relationships and build genuine connections with others (including the need for a social network during stress or crisis, or the importance of being genuine in sensitive interpersonal situations), but you'll have to find your own inspiration to drive your development.

There have been many studies about why executives fail. Most of them identified broken trust and political incompetence as primary factors. Once again, this failure has to do with

an inability to understand others and build solid, open and genuine relationships.

Too often, organizations select front-line leaders based on technical expertise (and more and more front-line jobs require a "working supervisor" who has that knowledge), but then the management succession pool becomes seeded with "technocrats" who ascend to higher, and more powerful, leadership roles. Here, their lack of EQ is exposed and their careers go off track.

'Agreeableness' is an important measure of emotional intelligence and is one of the five broad dimensions of personality that psychologists believe people are born with.

# Decisions, Decisions

As an exercise in minimalism, I was once asked by a client to select the two most important leadership competencies for good management from a list of several dozen. The choice was easy: Influence, or your personal power to persuade; and Problem Solving & Decision Making, which can define you as a leader through your legacy of decisions.

Research and experience tell us that these two competencies are among those that have the biggest impact on an organization.

## Divergent vs. Convergent Thinking

Making good decisions and solving thorny problems involves knowing about and executing a systematic process. From the simple “ready, aim, fire” model (or “ready, fire, aim” practiced by many *former* executives), to more complicated models involving root cause analysis, creative thinking, risk analysis of options and project management follow-through, all involve a certain defined progression. Understanding this implicit structure is fundamental to being an exceptional decision-maker. This overall process of making good decisions requires proficiency in two potentially contradictory arenas: divergent

the decision trigger. This involves some risk-taking. In a word, you must be decisive; then, you must be ready to sell and defend your decision as needed. Roger Von Oech, one of Silicon Valley’s most famous creativity consultants, characterizes the decision-making process in terms of four characters, or personalities, that you must be able to adopt. In the divergent phase, you must be an explorer and an artist, while in the convergent phase, you must be a judge and warrior.

When making decisions, personality also can come into play, potentially helping or hindering the process. You may have a natural disposition to act quickly—and perhaps prematurely. Or, you may be very creative in generating information and options but hesitant to pull the trigger. The Myers Briggs Type Indicator, a widely used personality assessment tool, can provide insight into your decision-making preferences. I recommend that all managers take the inventory early in their careers to get a better insight into their own preference.

And what role does intuition play? When should you trust your gut? In his book *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell notes that while intuition provides lightning-fast insight into a problem, it’s most reliable after years of experience in a specific deci-

If good judgment comes from experience, does the best experience come from lessons learned from bad judgment?

thinking (thinking sideways) and convergent thinking (being decisive).

Divergent or creative capability is required when initially confronting a decision. It’s at this point that assumptions and paradigms (stereotypical or preset ways of thinking) can blind a decision-maker to a better option. For example, if the problem is, *we have excessive turnover in the call center*, there may be a tendency to jump to the first solution that comes to mind (e.g., *we need a better selection process*).

However, a better starting point would be to hit the mental “pause” button and examine the root cause of the turnover. Research suggests that six factors influence retention: pay equity, benefits equity, good working conditions, quality supervision, opportunity to advance/grow and the work/job itself. Exploring all of these possible contributing factors would probably lead to a better solution.

Once root cause analysis and a creative exploration of options is complete, it’s time for convergent thinking—pulling

decision-making context. Vic Braden, the famous tennis pro, could nearly unerringly predict if a player would “fault” on a serve in the milliseconds after a ball was tossed in the air. But it was his years of playing and coaching in the world of pro tennis that guided his insight. So while intuition plays a part, be careful when extrapolating your intuitive insight from one context to a less familiar one.

So what does all this tell us about learning to be a better decision-maker or selecting leaders who can fill those roles? The decision-making process can be broken down and understood, which means it can also be learned. Also, because the Problem Solving & Decision Making competency is so important to a manager’s success, it should be part of any hiring or promotion decision. Asking candidates to describe their best or worst decisions, or using an in-basket exercise to test their problem solving ability during the interview, can help screen for this most important competency.



# The Skillful Use of Power

As a manager, ask yourself honestly: Do your people do what you ask because they respect you, or because they respect the position you hold? This isn't an academic question, mind you—employees will follow orders because the chain of command confers authority, and because they seek the rewards that come with compliance. But truly engaged employees—your best performers—are more productive when they are motivated to perform out of respect for you as a person *and* a leader.

Your ability to influence, or your personal power to persuade, is one of two primary competencies that define successful leadership (the other is Problem Solving & Decision Making, which we discussed earlier). Influence is the focal competency for understanding how to persuade others and gain commitment. It identifies the special set of behaviors and motivations that leaders need to attract others to their agenda and to motivate them to act on their goals.

## Identifying sources of power

Leadership experts tend to approach the Influence competency from two very different directions. The more widely adopted approach has been situational, in which leaders alternate between a more directive style to a more collaborative style depending on the circumstance. For example, an intern fresh from school would need more guidance and specific instruction at first—a directive style. As the beginner gains knowledge, skill and confidence, the leader would shift to a more collaborative and participative approach. Ultimately the leader would be able to delegate responsibilities to a fully competent team member with broad guidance and minimal supervision.

In special circumstances, a more authoritarian style may be necessary, such as those involving a safety or integrity violation in which the consequences are severe. In such instances, leaders need to act swiftly and assertively to confront and correct the situation. Conversely, in special counseling circumstances during which dictating an outcome would be inappropriate, leaders need to be more participative. This approach may apply when offering career or life advice.

The second approach to leadership, which I believe is more instructive in defining a true leader, identifies the sources of power that authorize leaders. These power sources can be presented on a continuum arranged from positional (granted by an organization) to personal (a portable form of authority granted by followers to an individual). This graph illustrates this concept.

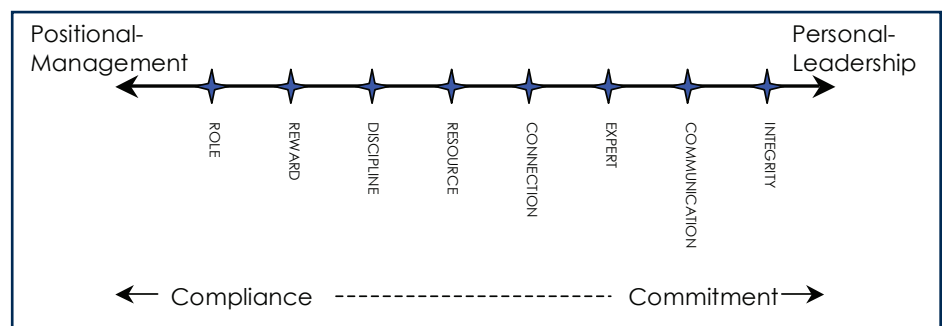
Since anyone in an official supervisory position has been delegated authority to reward or punish their direct reports, the role itself grants an aura of power that allows the supervisor to direct others. These sources are fundamentally transactional in nature. For example, if an employee conforms to assigned duties and standards, the

reward is keeping the job, receiving a bonus or earning time off. Those who don't comply face discipline. While this performance "contract" ensures compliance, it may not lead to commitment.

At the other end of the power continuum is where true leadership is found. If you think of the best leaders you've encountered—those who produce exceptional results, and who are widely respected, generally likeable and passionate about what they do—you've probably noticed that they operate out of a personal power base. They are honest, open and fair experts who are excellent communicators of a legitimate agenda. They generate personal power from three sources: expertise, skillful communications and integrity, and are often sought out for advice. You grant them power by permitting them to influence you because of who they are!

In daily life, we often encounter examples of "expert" leadership, or people whom we acknowledge know more about a subject than we do. The power that comes from being a great communicator is a little more complex. Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech is a case of 12 minutes of elegant oratory that moved a nation. But being a great public speaker isn't a prerequisite to being a powerful communicator. To be one, first you must perfect your message, or what you intend to communicate. And keep in mind that grooming, dress, gestures and inflection matter. In his book *Silent Messages*, Albert Mehrabian, professor emeritus of psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles, estimates that the impact of about 70 percent of every message is non-verbal. For leaders, all the world is a stage, and they must perfect and carefully transmit their intended message.

Much of the Influence competency can be learned, but there is an important element that needs to be confirmed before promoting someone into a leadership role. I call this quality "leadership identity," or having the natural inclination and motivation to assume responsibility over others. The famous Harvard researcher David McClelland noted that anyone who wants to lead requires a "need for power" motivation. Edgar Schein from MIT calls this characteristic "general management competence." Because some candidates for leadership roles may be motivated just by ambition, or the dark side of power, organizations need to ensure that candidates will truly resonate in leadership roles before promoting them.



# Driven to Succeed, but by What?

Next, we'll tackle an extremely important competency: Drive/Energy. This competency is absolutely essential among leaders, yet it is difficult—if not impossible—to acquire through training. In fact, this attribute is usually naturally present in a leader (or not!). Drive and energy are manifested in the passion and stamina that extraordinary leaders demonstrate on a daily basis.

## What drives your leaders?

A leader's personal motivation is an extremely complex matter, and there are multiple theories on the topic. Abraham Maslow, the famous psychologist, theorized a human motivational need hierarchy composed of a series of satisfaction thresholds; each threshold is a necessary, but not sufficient, requirement for ascending to a more mature motivational state. The first threshold is existential (i.e., the basic needs for food, water, shelter, safety, etc.); the next is the tribal motivation to have satisfactory relationships. Only after those needs are met can one finally rise to pure growth and actualization motives (i.e., more mature human and leadership drives).

Frederick Herzberg's theory isolated two factors correlated with motivation at work. The first—the hygiene, or external, factor—is actually more associated with dissatisfaction; factors include company policy, supervision, relationship with boss, work conditions, salary and relationship with peers. The other factor, which he called the motivators, is correlated with true satisfaction. These motivational factors include achievement, recognition, the work itself, responsibility, advancement and growth; these represent the sources of positive organizational energy.

Both of these theories suggest that the more mature motives of growth, challenge, achievement and fulfilling relationships are part of an advanced leader's drive. Yet David McClelland, a noted leadership researcher, added a “need for power” to the basic leadership motives of achievement and affiliation. He found that the best leaders have a natural resonance in positions of authority: They enjoy leading.

McClelland did, however, issue a caution about the dark side of power motivation. He warned against placing those who seem motivated for leadership roles, but are actually stuck at lower, less mature levels of a motivational hierarchy (arrested development!). Leaders who are overly concerned with salary/compensation equity, or the trappings of power positions (corner offices, special parking spots, titles, etc.) could eclipse the more productive drives of accomplishment and growth.

## Hiring a true leader

To help explore a candidate's motives to be a leader, examine his or her track record, as reported on a resume or application, plus ask open-ended interview questions about historical accomplishments. A true leader will report pride in accomplishments done by others on the team, or pride in developing others for greater responsibility. Leadership is a vicarious thrill and is actually about getting work done through others, so be wary of a candidate who is overly invested in his or her technical expertise or personal accomplishments; this person may be less motivated to develop as a leader.

A substantial part of a leader's energy is purely physical. The stamina and composure required to lead comes, in part, from a healthy lifestyle. Diet, exercise and balance provide the vigor required to maintain the energy and positive outlook needed; creativity and energy are not associated with being a workaholic. Stephen Covey said it best in his book *Seven Habits of Highly Successful People*: Leaders must occasionally stop to “sharpen the saw” to stay effective. For a leader this means having avocations, friendships and diversions that provide recreation. In fact, our research shows six factors are essential to a balanced and energetic life for a leader:

1. **Vocation:** The choice of leadership as a true calling; a genuine desire to do good things through others
2. **Avocation:** Hobbies and pursuits outside of work that are refreshing and recreational
3. **Relationships:** Genuine friendships that provide emotional support
4. **Materiality:** A degree of financial independence that provides security (compensation/insurance/retirement)
5. **Spirituality:** A satisfying world view that helps put work (and life) in a meaningful context
6. **Health:** The diet, exercise and rest necessary for the energy required to lead

Dysfunctional leaders, or leaders who ultimately derail, often have big gaps in one or more of these areas.

Leaders who have a mature motivational engine (a balanced life with a personal need to achieve and lead) can get inspiration through truly meaningful work. In an organizational context, this translates into a positive mission, vision and values that provide identity and meaning.



# Get Organized!

## How to deal with the demands of multiple priorities

This discussion started with competencies considered by some to be the “softer” side of leadership—building relationships, exercising personal power and finding the right personal motivation to lead. Now let's turn to an absolutely essential “hard” competency: Organizing & Planning.

Some authorities make a distinction between leading and managing—and rightfully so. They point out that leading is about *people*: building relationships, creating motivation and being effective (doing the right things well). Managing, they say, is about *tasks*: namely, being efficient (doing things right).

The Organizing & Planning competency is at the heart of good managing. It involves the knowledge and skills to successfully handle the many competing priorities that confront a leader every day. In the past two decades, technology has drastically amplified the need for this competency. Today's leaders are bombarded daily with boatloads of data, e-mails, text messages and other electronic communication that can easily distract if not handled appropriately.

### Time management

Time is a leader's most precious resource. Its allocation is always a zero sum game: you only get so many effective work hours in a day, and the time you give to one project, person or idea necessarily subtracts from something else. At the center of the Organizing & Planning competency is a difficult question: What is the best use of my time *right now*?

The very best time managers have the “helicopter quality”—they're able to mentally hover above the fray and determine priorities through a continuous process of triaging tasks by urgency and importance. They frequently use a structured process to label tasks and proactively manage priorities (see figure above). The key is to spend as much time as possible in quadrant 2 (very important, not urgent). This allows for the best thinking and results while focusing on the mission-critical issues of the organization. These tasks can be the most difficult to confront, however, and many managers fall into the trap of procrastinating on them until the pressure of a deadline forces them to act. Or they may spend too much time in quadrant 3, where it's easy to get caught up with solving easier challenges that are urgent but not all that important.

So how do you determine the relative importance of tasks and issues? Test them in terms of how mission-critical they are. If they impact mission delivery (our fleet is old and in continuous need of repair) or compromise a key value (this is an unsafe situation for our employees), then it's important for leadership attention. That's why it's imperative that every leader fully comprehend organizational purpose and operating principles, as well as his or her job description as it supports the mission. Missions vary with organizations, but there are some benchmark values that most organizations share:

	VERY URGENT	LESS URGENT
VERY IMPORTANT	<p><b>1</b></p> <p><b>“A” Priorities</b></p> <p><b>Urgent and important.</b></p> <p><b>Act now!</b></p>	<p><b>2</b></p> <p><b>“B+” Priorities</b></p> <p><b>Important but not urgent. The best quadrant to work in; you have time to incubate and consider.</b></p>
LESS IMPORTANT	<p><b>3</b></p> <p><b>“B-” Priorities</b></p> <p><b>Urgent but not important.</b></p>	<p><b>4</b></p> <p><b>“C” Priorities</b></p> <p><b>Not urgent or important.</b></p>

quality, innovation, service, finance and safety. Occasionally a value (like safety) will actually trump the mission.

The very best leaders provide real-time guidance to their organization by paying attention to the highest-priority items on the organizational agenda. For good or bad, if the leader behaves like something is a priority, then followers will, too! A leader cannot *not* communicate ... everything speaks.

### The importance of delegating

The most important time-management tool in a leader's tool kit is delegation. Lee Iacocca, the celebrated Chrysler CEO, famously said that his real leadership breakthrough came as a sales manager, when he realized that leadership was orchestrating the work of others (not doing it himself). When work came his way, he would always ask, “Is this the best use of my leadership time?” and “Who else can do this?” Imagine yourself as the orchestra conductor, where you must delegate the task assignments to the musicians. This is the ultimate goal of the strategic leader: orchestrating a team of experts.

By the way, you might be thinking right about now that the best time managers must be workaholics, putting in 16-hour days. But burnout, along with diminishing creativity and effective critical thinking, means it's your *responsibility* as a leader to take breaks for recreation and exercise. We've all felt that surge of energy and creativity that comes with getting away from work for even a day.

Learning Organizing & Planning skills is relatively

*Continued on page 10*

easy—it's the discipline to follow through that often trips up leaders. But Gallup research shows that the reward for being a good manager *and* a good leader is a 50 percent boost in productivity.

### Hiring the organized leader

When looking for a good organizer and planner across a slate of candidates, explore their daily, weekly and monthly schedules. Look for signs of organization, such as use of their calendar, follow-up lists, preparation, delegation as a habit, evidence of project planning, etc.

An excellent test for predicting these skills is the in-basket exercise. In this simulation, candidates are faced with

the overflowing in-basket of an absent predecessor. They must sort through multiple competing priorities and do so within time constraints. Later the exercise administrator can evaluate their triage logic and efficiency with organizing and planning tools.

While the leadership competencies such as Influence and Relationship Building might be seen as more compelling, Organizing & Planning skills provide the efficiency needed for a sustainable enterprise. Peter Drucker famously refers to “seed corn”—that essential component that must be set aside and reinvested if you hope to have a crop next year. It is Organizing & Planning that provide the seed corn for successful organizations.

Today's leaders are bombarded daily with boatloads of data, e-mails, text messages and other electronic communication that can easily distract if not handled appropriately.

# A Leader Cannot *Not* Communicate

The final competency in our discussion, Communication, is a collection of skills generally defined by the medium you use to deliver your message. And while the grand eloquence of a superb leader's speech, such as Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream," is often used to define the epitome of communication competence, the actual definition of good leadership communication is much simpler.

In his classic book *Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge*, Warren Bennis notes that in his study of 90 exceptional leaders, the true differentiator was not necessarily being good in a particular medium (i.e., public speaking, informal conversation or writing) but in how the leader is able to frame the message. For example, Bennis notes that a less proficient leader might describe an acre of land in terms of square yards, or hectares, while a true leader would describe an acre as "about the size of a football field" (or "pitch," for you soccer fans!). Leaders, then, look for ways to construct their message in a much more accessible way for all potential followers. They tell compelling stories and use parables and images to convey meaning.

Of course, having all media available for communicating a compelling story can amplify your effectiveness as a leader. Our research has isolated five distinct facets to effective leadership communication:

1. **Active Listening:** Giving full, proactive attention when others speak. This includes being aware of the importance of all the non-verbal cues that are expected, plus paraphrasing, summarizing and questioning to ensure full understanding.
2. **Communicativeness:** The frequency, volume and choice of medium that exceptional leaders choose for a message. For example, good leaders know that during times of dramatic change, it is almost impossible to over-communicate. They match the most effective medium to a message and make sure it is transmitted enough times for understanding and ownership. They also convey an eagerness to receive messages from others. They invite communication.
3. **Informal Communication:** Clearly and articulately conveying information in informal settings. A leader's communication reputation rests with the ability to connect with people in less formal situations. It is in these situations that messages are perfected and relationships are cemented.
4. **Presentation Skills:** Being able to deliver an engaging formal speech to a large gathering. This skill lets you get a message to a multitude quickly.
5. **Written Communication:** Writing clearly and concisely. While it is sometimes a neglected skill, good writing represents good thinking, and being able to craft a persuasive argument in written form can help frame a persuasive message delivered later in person.

## Communicate well, communicate often

Communication skills do truly distinguish exceptional leadership. Just being intelligent or having a good idea does not qualify you to lead and is not the same as attracting support for your agenda through the contagious enthusiasm generated in superior communication. To lead, you must communicate.

Being a good communicator also means being keenly aware that as a leader, you *are* the message. What is on your calendar, how you present yourself, your attention to detail and a myriad of other verbal and non-verbal messages are constantly being transmitted whether you intend for them to or not.

It should be noted that direct followers are particularly fond of "active listening" in their leaders. An eloquent public speaker can still fall far short as a leader by being inaccessible, unapproachable or just plain disinterested in his or her direct reports. Informed decisions implemented by committed followers demand involvement, and active listening ensures that involvement.

Most people rate communication skills as only moderately difficult to acquire. Even presentation skills (which in some polls appears as the most feared item by the general population, even more than death!) can be mastered with practice. Our experience has shown, however, that it is not poor communication skills that often derail good leaders, but rather their vanishing motivation to communicate. The hubris that comes with power will often diminish the perceived need to communicate, and the leader will become isolated and less effective. Good leadership requires constant dialogue, and those at the top of an organization must be particularly aware of the general fear of speaking truth to power. They must work hard to stay in touch and remain approachable.

## Hiring a good communicator

Assessing communication skills in leadership candidates is fairly simple in the screening interview. The meeting format allows for evaluation of both informal and active listening competence; it is also easy in the panel interview format to require a brief (five-minute) presentation that will allow evaluation of this critical communication skill set. Samples of written work, prepared or spontaneous, are also relatively easily obtained; even e-mail exchanges with candidates can be revealing.

Evaluating a candidate's communicativeness competence does require asking specific behavioral episode questions about historical situations the candidate was involved in that required accelerated information sharing. For example, find out if a candidate has been in charge of a major organizational change, and examine the response in terms of how he or she maintained the dialogue needed to successfully manage the transition.

# The Big Six Plus One

All the competence it takes to lead

We began our discussion by noting that decades of leadership research has narrowed a much longer list to six competencies that predict effective leadership in a wide variety of settings (the 20 percent of competence that accounts for 80 percent of performance).

But unless you are the CEO of a very diverse conglomerate, there is also a seventh, more particular, competency that is necessary to be an effective leader: Technical/Functional Expertise. Having a specialized expertise not only generates personal power for a leader but also provides the content and professional/business context for a legitimate leadership agenda.

Here's an example of how our six competencies combine with expertise to produce exceptional leadership: Decades ago, Sam Walton had the dream "to give ordinary folks the chance to buy the same things as rich people." Walton's vision did not materialize in a vacuum—he was formally educated in business and decided early on to focus on a career in retail, specifically general merchandise. It was this knowledge of retail business that informed Walton's vision and eventually led to the world's largest discount retailer, Walmart.

If we were to rate Walton on our six essential competencies, he'd do well on all: He was a driven, passionate leader who knew how to communicate to all levels in his organization. He was a famous organizer—and indeed Walmart is still one of the most efficient organizations on the planet. Walton built a network of vendors and partners that allowed him to rapidly expand his business. But his original dream emerged inside of his special retail expertise and was then given life through his exceptional leadership.

It is this seventh competency that creates the context for most leaders to form an agenda.

## How to establish an agenda

Your first step in building a complete agenda is establishing the organizational mission. This statement of purpose is built around a core expertise. Take, for example, one medical device company's mission: improving the quality of patient care through the cost-effective monitoring of vital signs and fluid-delivery systems. This assumes expertise in health care, instrumentation and manufacturing.

To further differentiate your organization, you should add a set of values to your mission. Research reveals that excellent organizations differentiate themselves through quality, innovation and service. And they typically select one of these values to provide even greater identity and distinction. For example, if you are a manufacturer (like our medical instruments company), you must differentiate yourself through a quality product, but you could provide further separation through wonderful

As you look at gaining industry-specific expertise, it's a good idea to get insight into your own learning style. A credible instrument for doing this is the Kolb Learning Style Inventory. You can also get insight from [learning-styles-online.com/style/social-interpersonal](http://learning-styles-online.com/style/social-interpersonal).

customer service or continuous innovation.

The third component of your strategic agenda is a compelling vision. This is a creative statement of a preferred future for the organization. When John F. Kennedy challenged NASA to put a man on the moon by the end of the decade, he was expressing his dream for an agency with the mission of space exploration—but with a compelling benchmark of success.

In sum, a complete leadership agenda includes mission, values and vision that must be derived in an industry context.

## Defining technical competency

With more than 27,000 different position descriptions listed in the Dictionary of Occupational Titles, it isn't possible to identify explicit developmental options for a generic Technical/Functional Expertise competency. Every technical specialty requires different ability, knowledge and skill, and each individual comes with a unique learning style.

That said, to learn a functional specialty, you must first make sure to choose an area of expertise/career that truly excites you, then recognize the limits to your abilities. (You may love to play basketball, but at 5'7" you may have to choose another vocation that interests you, and keep basketball as a hobby.) Next, you need to identify the specific knowledge and skills necessary to being successful. (And remember, you don't need to have been the star player on your basketball team to be a great coach—what's important is that you played with heart and passion, and that you have the context and credibility of the experience.)

To personally validate this exploration of the Big Six, imagine several of the very best leaders you have ever known (leaders who generate superior results and who are respected, likable and passionate about what they do). Most likely you experienced them as inspirational, efficient and effective.

To arrive at that point, they probably started with a specific area of expertise that motivated them and then, through native talent and learning, acquired competence in the Big Six. These competencies provide the necessary foundation for prospecting, recruiting, selecting, training, appraising and promoting leaders.

The Big Six are your guide to selecting and developing the people who will lead your organization through the challenges of the decades to come.