

2

TRAIT APPROACH

INTRODUCTION

If you ever say someone has “what it takes to be a leader” or is “born to be a leader,” you are describing the underlying premise that has driven much of the research on the trait approach to leadership. In education settings, the trait approach is focused on identifying and promoting the traits that make an effective administrator, principal, or teacher.

The trait approach has its roots in leadership theory that suggests that certain people are born with special traits that make them great leaders. Traits refer to a set of distinctive characteristics, qualities, or attributes that describe a person. They are inherent and relatively unchanging over time. The trait approach is concerned with what traits leaders exhibit and who has these traits. It is an approach that focuses exclusively on the leader, not on the followers or the situation.

From the multitude of studies conducted through the years on personal characteristics, it is clear that many traits do contribute to leadership. Some of the important traits that are consistently identified in many of these studies are intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability (Table 2.1). In addition, researchers have found a strong relationship between leadership and the traits described by the *five-factor personality model*. *Extraversion* was the trait most strongly associated with leadership, followed by *conscientiousness*, *openness*, *low neuroticism*, and *agreeableness*.

Very closely related to the trait approach is the more contemporary research emphasis on strengths and leadership. The idea behind strengths leadership is that individuals have talents at which they excel or thrive. From these talents, strengths emerge. Strengths leadership requires leaders to recognize and capitalize on not only their own strengths but those of their followers as well.

TABLE 2.1 ■ Major Leadership Traits	
● Intelligence ● Self-confidence ● Determination	● Integrity ● Sociability

Source: Reprinted from Northouse, P. G. (2026). *Leadership: Theory and practice* (10th ed., p. 30). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Reprinted with permission.

The trait approach suggests that schools will work better if the people in positions of authority have designated leadership profiles. In choosing principals, administrators, and other leaders, a candidate's traits play a huge role in the selection process. To find the right people, it is common for organizations to use trait assessment instruments. The assumption behind these procedures is that selecting the right people will increase organizational effectiveness. Following this model, schools can specify the characteristics or traits that are important to them for particular positions and then use trait assessment measures to determine whether an individual fits these needs.

The trait approach is also used for personal awareness and development. By analyzing their own traits, individuals can learn their strengths and weaknesses, and get a feel for how others in the organization see them. A trait assessment gives individuals a clearer picture of who they are as leaders and how they fit into the organizational hierarchy. In areas where their traits are lacking, leaders can try to make changes in what they do or where they work to increase their traits' potential impact.

CASE STUDIES

The following case studies illustrate how the trait approach can be applied to leadership in educational settings. The first case looks at a middle school principal who must select a new assistant principal from two qualified candidates. The second case examines why a university administrator is not being considered for a promotion.

At the end of each case, you will find two sets of questions that will help in analyzing the case. The first set can be answered using information provided in this chapter; the second set, Advanced Questions, provides an opportunity for deeper exploration of the trait approach to leadership and is designed to coincide with the concepts discussed in Chapter 2 of *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (10th ed.).

CASE 2.1 PRE-K-12 CONCENTRATION

HIRING A NEW ASSISTANT MIDDLE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

An affluent public school district in the Midwest is completing construction on a new middle school that will house students in Grades 6–8. The school is slated to open in the fall, and the district administrative team has filled all the building's leadership positions except for the assistant principal. The role of assistant principal includes managing school operations, discipline, parent conferences, and instruction planning.

Maureen Moser, a dynamic, engaging, intelligent leader with eight years of building-level administrative experience, is being transferred to the new building as its lead principal. She has a reputation for being confident, determined, and sociable with all members of the staff and community. Maureen assembled a team of five individuals comprising teachers, support staff, and parents to assist her in selecting the new assistant principal.

Most of the applications received are from certified administrators with no administrative experience. After two months of screening applications, the team has interviewed the five most qualified candidates. The only two candidates with any formal administrative experience are interviewed but dismissed for various reasons. The interviewing team has selected two finalists but is divided on which one is the better fit for the new school and will best serve in the capacity as the assistant principal. Maureen has strong feelings toward one of the two candidates. While she sees one as a mirror image of herself, she admits the other has complementary traits that would make a well-rounded teammate.

One finalist is Jamie Patte, a fifth-grade teacher at a neighboring progressive suburban elementary school. She is in her ninth year of teaching, all in Grade 5 in the same district. Most recently, Jamie completed her administrative certification program through a prestigious state university. Jamie's references describe her as organized, dependable, creative, accepting, trusting, and nurturing. These traits surfaced during her first-round interview through her interactions with committee members and responses to the various questions. During a tour of the new building, Jamie was curious about its layout, noted some possible safety issues, and asked insightful questions about how the building will meet the needs of the students and programs.

The second finalist is Dwayne Boren, a seventh-grade language arts teacher at a middle school in an urban district. He has 10 years of teaching experience spanning Grades 6–8 mainly in language arts, but also has taught study skills and coached middle school basketball. He completed his administrative certification program at a large urban university with a positive reputation. Dwayne's references describe him as assertive, positive, decisive, confident, and determined. During the interview, the committee was impressed with his intelligence and the level of confidence that came from Dwayne's responses. The committee members also remarked on his self-confidence and how engaging he was throughout the entire process.

—Thomas Starmack, Bloomsburg University

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Questions

1. Based on leadership traits, which of the two candidates do you believe is most like Maureen? Use specific traits to justify your response.
2. Explain why the candidate not chosen in Question 1 may be more complementary and less a mirror image. Use specific traits to justify your response.
3. The committee is composed of educators and parents. What traits from each candidate do you think most appeal to the teachers? What traits from each candidate do you think most appeal to the parents?

Advanced Questions

4. Maureen was identified as an effective building leader, thus being transferred to the head principal position in the new building. Do the traits she has justify her success? Explain.
5. In what ways could the weaknesses of the trait approach affect the selection of a candidate and the new hire's long-term success in this role?
6. Draft a letter to Maureen explaining which candidate should be hired with a basis on leadership traits to support your decision.

CASE 2.2 HIGHER EDUCATION CONCENTRATION

WHY CAN'T DARIN LEAD?

Darin Dawkins is frustrated. He has been an assistant vice president in advancement for Springfield Community College for the past 14 years, serving under two vice presidents. Both times that the vice president of advancement position was open, Darin applied for it and, while considered and interviewed by the selection panel, wasn't chosen for the job.

It was announced this week that his current boss, Betsy Williams, will be leaving to become the president of Flynn University, a small private college in the Northwest. The community college staff and faculty all say that Betsy will make a great college president: She is highly intelligent, very extraverted, and confident. The only woman on SCC's President's Cabinet, she exhibited a strong determination to successfully make her mark in what many considered to be an "old boys' club." Under her leadership, SCC had its first successful capital campaign, raising \$12 million for a new science building. The faculty at the college highly approve of Betsy, saying she seems more authentic than any of the other cabinet members. Staff like her as well; she is sought out as a mentor by a number of young professionals from other departments.

Darin, on the other hand, believes he has been languishing in Betsy's shadow. The job of vice president is a high-profile position, encompassing the departments of alumni relations, development, and college marketing and communications. Betsy is always on the go, meeting with donors, legislators, the media, and high-powered individuals who can help move the college forward. Darin keeps a lower profile, often staying in his office, happily working on spreadsheets or researching and writing grant applications. He is a very successful grant writer, having brought in more than \$4 million in the past three years. People who work on projects with him describe him as extremely competent and highly ethical. He is liked by faculty, but none of them seek him out for advice or guidance with work issues. In general, the advancement staff see Darin as "a nice guy" but not really a go-getter. Outside the department, Darin's name is familiar to faculty and staff, but no one is really sure what he does at the college.

Darin has decided to approach Betsy for her input on how he can become the next vice president. She is well aware that it is a job Darin really wants and, more so, he believes after 14 years that he deserves it. In their meeting, Betsy starts out by asking Darin what leadership qualities he has that he believes will make him successful as the vice president.

Darin thinks a minute and says, "I have a lot of experience in this area. I've worked here for 14 years."

"That's true, and that's valuable," Betsy responds. "But what personal characteristics do you have that you think will make you a good leader?"

"Well, I am a hard worker," Darin answers. "I stay late and work on weekends to get the job done. And I am good at grant writing and understand more about the finances of the College Foundation than anyone."

Betsy nods. "Yes, you are a hard worker and very good with the numbers. If I asked the other members of our office what your strengths are, what do you think they would tell me?"

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Darin gets very quiet. After a moment of reflection, he says, "Well, I think they like me, don't you?"

"Yes," Betsy answers. And waits. When Darin doesn't offer anything more, she says, "Darin, I know you applied for the vice president's job the last time it was open, and I was hired. Why do you think I was chosen over you?"

Darin becomes a little flustered, his face turning red. "Really, I don't know," he stammers. "I thought maybe it was because you were a woman, and they wanted to have some diversity."

Betsy is quiet for a moment, then says gently, "Well, Darin, I don't believe that's why they hired me. And I am sure I haven't been hired to be Flynn University's president just because I am a woman."

Embarrassed, Darin stands up. "I appreciate your time, Betsy," he says as he turns and quickly leaves her office.

—Authors

Questions

1. What leadership traits does Betsy exhibit that make her successful in her position as vice president?
2. Which of the major leadership traits does Darin have?
3. How would you suggest Darin improve on the major leadership traits he may lack?

Advanced Questions

4. Compare and contrast Betsy's and Darin's emotional intelligence.
5. Compare and contrast Betsy and Darin using the *Big Five personality factors*. Do the differences in their personalities explain why Betsy is in a leadership position and Darin is not? Explain your answer.
6. While traits are important for leadership, what *behaviors or styles* of leadership does Darin have that could make him an effective vice president?