

Trait Theory of Leadership Explained



Syed Aquib Ur Rahman ✓

Senior Executive Content

Updated on Feb 28, 2024 18:28 IST

Over the last few centuries, historians, social philosophers, and theorists have described, critiqued, and modified leadership theories. These postulations have come a long way with the Trait Theory of Leadership, with no single definition of what effective leadership is.



One of the widely accepted [theories on leadership](#) that systemised the approach that leaders are born was the trait theory. It was more empirical as it aimed to look into genetic attributes (Kean Sheah Soon Lee).

This leadership theory of traits was the main leadership approach for roughly four decades at the beginning of the 20th century. Then it also resurged later.

We explain the trait theory of leadership in detail through a couple of perspectives today.



Disclaimer: This PDF is auto-generated based on the information available on Shiksha as on 29-Feb-2024.

You should check some [strategy and leadership courses](#) along the way too.

What is the Trait Theory of Leadership?

The trait theory of leadership refers to the approach where leaders have certain qualities or a set of traits. These are specific behavioural patterns that differentiate leaders from followers.

The Great Man Theory proposed by Thomas Carlyle in the 1800s gave rise to this theory. Carlyle, however, looked at historical figures, including Julius Caesar and Napoleon Bonaparte. He studied their common leadership traits and described what constitutes a good leader. But his approach was debunked because of the leader's association with nobility and divinity.

The trait theory of leadership considers a few broad characteristics – mental, social, and physical. The combination of these is what makes an effective leader.

Perspectives on the Trait Theory of Leadership

It is essential to note the top contributors to this trait theory. Some scholars studied personalities, while others looked at it from an organisational perspective.

Notable names include Gordon Allport, Ralph Melvin Stogdill, Timothy Judge, Joyce Bono, and Stephen Zaccaro. Their studies on traits and leadership spanned between the 1930s to the early 2000s.

Ralph Stogdill on Trait Theory of Leadership

In the late 1930s and 40s, Gordon Allport divided personalities based on cardinal, central, and secondary traits. Contemporary scholars like Stogdill did two significant studies – one in 1947-48 and the other in 1970.

Stogdill's first study concluded that leadership is situational – that they do not become leaders because they have certain qualities. Instead, the traits they possess should cater to the situations.



He studied over 124 traits in the first study and developed the following traits.

- Intelligence
- Alertness
- Insight
- Responsibility
- Initiative
- Persistence
- Self-confidence
- Sociability

In his second study, he identified these situationally dependent traits.

- Strong motivation to take responsibility and accomplish tasks.
- Enthusiasm and determination in pursuing goals.
- Willingness to take risks and think creatively when solving problems.
- Desire to take the initiative in social situations.
- Confidence in oneself and a clear sense of personal identity.
- Acceptance of the consequences that arise from decisions and actions.
- Readiness to handle interpersonal stress and maintain composure.
- Ability to tolerate frustration and delay without losing focus.
- Skill in influencing the behaviour of others.
- Capability to structure social interaction systems to achieve specific objectives.



Judge *et al.* on 5-Factor Personality Model & Leadership

The 5-Factor Model on Personality, aka the Big Five, discusses the following.

Openness to Experience reflects an individual's preference for novelty, curiosity, and intellectual pursuits.

Conscientiousness describes an individual's level of organisation, self-discipline, and goal-directed behaviour.

Extraversion represents the degree to which a person is outgoing, energetic, and sociable.

Agreeableness reflects an individual's tendency to be cooperative, compassionate, and considerate towards others.

Neuroticism refers to the extent to which a person experiences negative emotions, such as anxiety, sadness, and mood swings.





Now Judge *et al.* found a statistical correlation between these five factors and leadership. After making a meta analysis of around 78 leadership and personality studies, these were the results.

Table 2
Meta-Analysis of the Relationship Between the Big Five Personality Traits and Leadership

Trait	Average					80% CV		95% CI	
	<i>k</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>r</i>	ρ	<i>SD_{ρ}</i>	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper
Neuroticism	48	8,025	-.17	-.24	.18	-.47	-.01	-.30	-.18
Extraversion	60	11,705	.22	.31	.17	.09	.53	.26	.36
Openness	37	7,221	.16	.24	.11	.09	.38	.19	.28
Agreeableness	42	9,801	.06	.08	.17	-.14	.29	.02	.13
Conscientiousness	35	7,510	.20	.28	.17	.06	.51	.22	.34

Note. *k* = Number of correlations; ρ = estimated corrected correlation; CV = credibility interval; CI = confidence interval. We used Whitener's (1990) formula for standard error of the mean correlation in computing confidence intervals.

The table above shows which of the five personality traits is closer to making an effective leader.

Here, extraversion is the most important trait of a good leader. In contrast, conscientiousness is the least favourable one.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Trait Theory of Leadership

Here are some advantages of the trait theory of leadership.

- This theory and its later modifications became more systematic over the years and could finally debunk Carlyle's proposition.
- The trait theories create the standard for organisations to evaluate a leader's likelihood of success or failure.
- Organisations can even recruit candidates based on a good leader's commonly benchmarked interpersonal skills.

Now, let's look at some of the limitations of the trait theory of leadership.

- It cannot be justified in all situations. For instance, if a leader is

assertive, they may not be great during a crisis situation, because they may lack empathy and only focus on goals.

- Not all individuals with the stated leadership qualities are in leadership positions in an organisation. They may never get to exercise power or lead team members in their entire careers.
- There are no hard results with the trait theory of leadership. While the individual may possess the most required characteristic, like being an extrovert, it does not prove that it positively affects the work environment.

Parting Thoughts

Hopefully, after reading this blog, you can understand more about the trait theory of leadership. Do you think it still applies today?

Further Reads

Top Leadership Skills



Top 10 Effective Leadership Skills that Help Every... Business Grow

Know which are the most crucial leadership skills today. Find out how you can apply those skills with additional tips as experts and senior leaders suggest.



Learn About Situational Leadership Theory

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to leadership. The Situational Leadership Theory explains this flexibility based on the complex needs of team members and leaders. This is an enduring approach on...[read more](#)

Top Management Skills



Top 10 Management Skills that You Must Acquire in 2023

Managing a team is a complex role, and organisations today need adaptable managers who have the top management skills. Find out the most essential ones that employers will value in...[read more](#)



Disclaimer: This PDF is auto-generated based on the information available on Shiksha as on 29-Feb-2024.

FAQs

What are the ethical considerations associated with using trait theory to evaluate and develop leaders?

Can anyone develop leadership traits?

How does the Trait Theory compare to other leadership theories?

How do individual differences impact the development and expression of leadership traits?

Can leadership development programmes effectively nurture traits associated with effective leadership?

