



## Temperaments and “Leadership Potential”

*Do you have to fit a certain profile  
to be a leader?*

Tim Stevenson

**MUCH CONVENTIONAL WISDOM** about leadership, in my firm opinion and experience, is simply wrong.

Too many people believe that to be a successful leader you must fit a certain profile. Leaders are those who are self-confident, verbally-adept, assertive, extroverted, attractive, and bold (they’re usually tall, as well). They stand out in a crowd and command attention through their charisma. I call this the Conventional Model.

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This article is adapted from *BETTER: The Fundamentals of Leadership* by Tim Stevenson. It is available at Amazon.com.

According to this superficial view, less assertive, quieter, more introverted persons need not apply. In fact, if you are physically shorter than average, forget it.

### Disproved by history and research

This is nonsense. Some of the greatest leaders in the history of the world, in all kinds of spheres, did not fit the Conventional Model. Effective leaders have come in all temperaments, personality types, and styles.

Modern research examining people who have led the most successful companies supports this. The works of Jim Collins (*Good to Great* and *Great by Choice*) are good examples. His team found that the most successful companies are led by what they call “Level 5 leaders,” characterized by “a paradoxical blend of personal humility and intense professional will.” In personality, some are described as being introverted, modest, workmanlike, mild-mannered, quiet, and sometimes even shy. Their “professional will,” however, is laser-focused on the success of the enterprise.



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The same conclusions were reached by a team examining the world's most innovative companies in *Collective Genius* by Hill, Brandeau, Truelove, and Lineback. They flatly state that leaders of the most innovative companies do not fit the common conception of a leader. They describe these leaders as thinkers, idealistic, generous, and open regarding their own weaknesses. Again, however, they possess powerfully-focused will toward their organization's success.

The title of the book's Epilogue expresses their concern: "Where will we find tomorrow's leaders of innovation?" They point out:

**If today's high-potential leaders of innovation don't fit today's popular conception of a good leader, many of them will be invisible to current systems for identifying and developing tomorrow's leaders.**

Many of the leaders who have made the largest positive impact in world history would not even be recommended for leadership development training today in modern companies. Believing they can spot "leadership potential," companies overlook people who don't fit the mold of the Conventional Model. No one seems to ask whether those doing the evaluating are themselves qualified to do so. How do you know they are qualified to make such an assessment? Because they are bosses? That just shows how this pattern is a self-sustaining system. They are often using themselves as the yardstick for determining "leadership potential."

Is it more natural for some personality types to be assertive? Yes, of course. Do certain temperaments lend themselves more easily to stepping forward and taking charge? Again, yes. *But these do not guarantee success in leadership.* A person of any temperament can learn, grow, and become an effective leader. I lay out the arguments for this at length

in my book *BETTER: The Fundamentals of Leadership*.

Even though there is abundant evidence available supporting this fact, it is like pulling an oak stump out of the ground to dislodge from people's minds their assumptions regarding the Conventional Model of leadership.

## Consequences of these misconceptions

The superficial common view of who is qualified to lead has several negative consequences:

The common view emphasizes professional competence (knowledge and skills) at the expense of personal conduct (behaviors). There are many would-be leaders who impress you at the beginning with their charisma, intelligence, and force of personality, but who go on to shoot themselves in the foot in leadership opportunities. Bad behavior can undermine and ruin their credibility, which is the currency of leadership. Being "the smartest person in the room" is no proof that someone can lead successfully.

Since the usual approach is to pre-select leadership development candidates based on their supposed "leadership potential" (translation: they fit the mold of the Conventional Model of a leader), many quieter, less assertive men and women are completely overlooked. Some of these may possess the greatest actual leadership potential in the organization, but they aren't even considered for the training. They are less likely to be considered for promotions for the same reasons.

Many more introverted individuals buy into the message overtly or covertly communicated to them: "You're not leadership material." Knowing they don't possess the charisma and assertive self-will of others, they are

discouraged from pursuing opportunities for development.

Since the temperament and personality of the Conventional Model is simply *assumed* as a requirement for leadership, leadership development training tends to center around pre-selecting these and teaching skills, tools, and techniques. These may offer good and helpful material, but it is not the same thing as genuine leadership development.

### More than skills, tools, and techniques

The common emphasis on skills, tools, and techniques in leadership development efforts (useful though they may be) obscures the fact that it is really about developing *the leader him- or herself*. It is a *person* who leads, and they lead *people*, not machines.

A quality leader does not rely on techniques to lead others. Leadership is not mere manipulation to get people to do what you want them to do. Leadership is not something external you turn on and off. *Leadership is who you are*. Leadership is about inspiring people to move together toward a better future. Authenticity is the necessary quality, and it must be demonstrated *over time*.

Most of what you hear about “leadership potential” is misguided. I am convinced it’s largely a myth, because there is one — *and only one* — way to know if someone can be a successful leader: **You see him or her do it.** When you *see* someone win and lead followers successfully, *that’s* when you know she or he is a leader. Everything prior is sheer guesswork.

No matter how technical or numbers-driven a business may be, business is about *people* inspiring *people* to get work done with and through *people*. The difference between one company and another of comparable size and history is not a major gap in the intelligence or expertise of its leaders. It will be found in their ability to build a healthy values- and performance-based culture by design and inspire people to give their best in cooperation with one another in pursuit of organizational success. That’s leadership.

### What you can do

A person of any temperament and style can learn, grow, and improve as a leader with intentional effort. It is a lifetime work and no one “masters” leadership. You can, however, get on the path to learning and developing if you learn the fundamentals and practice them.

If you are fortunate enough to possess some of the qualities associated with the Conventional Model, that’s great — as long as you are self-aware and wise enough to know you can’t *rely* solely on them. You need to learn the fundamentals of leadership and diligently practice positive behaviors like anyone else, or you’ll undermine those gifts.

Organizations that wean themselves off the myth of leadership potential and provide opportunities for *everyone* to learn, grow, and display their real potential through *demonstrating* leadership ability will find themselves far ahead of the pack in developing new and better leaders. **L**