

Perception is Reality: Your Strengths Matter

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Abstract

Perception is reality. While you perceive yourself to be an effective leader even under stress, do your colleagues share this perception of you? Your perception of effective leadership may be shared by others who work with you. People in leadership may see a relationship between “leaders in title” and “leaders in action” from their own experiences, but this is not guaranteed. Understanding yourself is imperative. Embracing your strengths and appreciating others’ perceptions of you help you to be a better leader. Possessing a keen sense of self will help you to be an authentic leader and provide insights about what makes you stand out to others. While not all leaders possess distinguishable leadership traits or skill sets, certain commonalities are expected from all leaders. Take the time to know yourself by investing in assessments and candid discussions designed to embrace the leader that you are in your heart and mind.

Introduction

Capturing the essence of you as a leader while attempting to understand your followers’ perceptions extends beyond title, length of time with your school system, and paycheck stubs. Individuals who act in some sort of leadership capacity develop from a plethora of backgrounds. They will also influence the leaders who follow them by being part of the background from which new leaders will emerge. To be an effective leader and to lay the framework for what will follow requires that you have a complete understanding of yourself as a leader. A thorough understanding of leadership should start with a keen awareness of your own strengths and how your strengths interact with your environment. You should understand yourself before you spend countless hours developing the next generation of leaders to replace you upon your promotion or retirement. What are your strengths? Does a litany of responsibilities associated with effective leadership cross your mind? All too often, our individual strengths are rarely considered in the quest to increase academic achievement, exceed No Child Left

Behind's (NCLB) adequate yearly progress, and foster healthy relationships with professional colleagues, community stakeholders, the media, your school board, and in your personal life.

While some of your colleagues may proclaim or label themselves as natural born leaders or leaders by title, authenticity is measured when others working with you are open and willing to stand behind or with you. To become an authentic leader you must fully understand your own strengths and then effectively use those strengths in making leadership decisions. Adler (1983) found that "subordinates were more likely to display the leadership style of their supervisors, the more successful and competent the supervisor was perceived to be" (p. 5). Perceptions are important for defining your own degree of self-esteem as you grow in your leadership role.

My Perception and Their Perspectives

The term leader is often used to label someone who has overall operational and administrative responsibility for an organization such as a school or a school system. The term can also be used to identify someone who takes the lead in accomplishing a task or a series of tasks. However, the bestowing of title alone does not define an authentic leader, for it is the individual's personal and professional strengths that lay the foundation for their leadership success and their right to be called a leader.

With official titles and roles removed, core leadership strengths and traits may then be linked to individual and personal strength sets. While ample literature and research highlight various leadership strengths associated with specific career fields, job titles, and responsibilities, gaps exist between self-assessed leadership strengths, the title they hold, and leadership qualities expressed by leaders' colleagues.

The ability to consistently identify the relationship between individuals in leadership roles, their self-perceived leadership strengths, and the perceptions of those who work with them is a challenge worth accepting. Terms used to describe those in leadership roles vary and individual leadership strengths and traits are also not constant. Although there is a common list of leadership elements, there is no consensus as to which of these strengths tops the list as the most critical leadership characteristic.

There is not a clear and replicable relationship between an individual in a leadership role and the characteristics or strengths associated with leaders. Yet, it

is important to understand yourself and others in terms of shared leadership strengths and perceptions. As a critical piece of knowing yourself, the degree of self-esteem you possess may directly relate to the image of leader you exhibit.

I am a Leader – I Think

Leadership research from a myriad of professions can help you be more definitive and understand that strengths, perceptions, and leadership qualities are not limited to specific careers. Daniel (2006) studied the United States Marines' School of Leadership and the VOICE leadership model: Vision, Organizations, Integrity, Communication, and Execution. The author presented ideas for using VOICE traits and the trickle-up style of leadership by those being led. The *trickle-up* leadership style may directly apply to you as leader in that your subordinates may or may not be encouraged to approach you based on VOICE traits, real or perceived. Daniel also noted the importance of language and leadership by utilizing appropriate terminology for consistency and modeling. Think about Daniel's use of *trickle-up*. Which direction does your leadership style trickle? How consistent are you in using appropriate terminology? Do you model what you preach?

Studying the importance of transformational qualities and their effects on leader influence, the organization, and society, Jandaghi, Matin, and Farjami (2008) used the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) to examine leadership and factors critical to transformational leadership. Traits included charisma, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration of those following the leader. Think of how these traits parallel your own personal strength traits. Are you considered charismatic? How motivational are you? How considerate are you of those whom you lead?

Using the Multifactor Leadership and Occupational Personality Questionnaires, van Eeden, Cilliers, and van Deventer (2008) researched the interpersonal and social skills of leaders by comparing these skills and strengths to three styles of leadership: transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and laissez-faire behaviors. Transformation leadership including idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration was also discussed. Which type of leadership do you demonstrate? Are you considerate? If not, when are you not considerate? What characteristic do individuals have that cause you to be less considerate? The answers to these questions can be quite telling if you are honest with yourself.

Jackson (2009) presented four specific leadership styles: commanders, coaches, counselors, and conductors. Jackson found one common strand among the various styles pertaining to vision. His findings indicate that self-awareness is central to leadership. How aware are you of yourself? Are you a commander or a coach? Do you have a vision? Can you articulate your vision to others? Can those whom you lead see consistency between your vision and your actions?

House and Mitchell (1974) described leadership qualities as the following:

- Directive leadership style – a leader who gives followers instructions about their task, including expectations of how it should be done, and a completion timeline.
- Supportive leadership style – a leader who is friendly and approachable as a leader and guides from a humanistic perspective.
- Achievement-oriented leadership style – a leader who challenges followers to perform at the highest level possible while setting an expectation of excellence.

Which of these leadership styles do you practice? If you practice all three, are you consistent in your practice? Which style of leadership would your colleagues mention first in describing you as a leader? Remember that others' perceptions of your leadership qualities may, in fact, differ from your own views.

Your leadership characteristics may also have been influenced by leaders whom you admired, who served as a mentor, or who made you feel wonderful by nurturing your self-worth. Recall memories and images of favored leaders. What common characteristics did these special individuals possess? What leadership strengths did they exhibit? Does a pattern of shared strengths mentally form? What are those traits? Perhaps they align with your own strengths. Understanding the strengths of others may help you in understanding your own strengths and how you can best influence tomorrow's leaders.

Determining concrete leadership characteristics and strengths, however, is not a simple task. Degrees of subjectivity, personal interpretation, and individual opinions are a part of the complex process. You are both a part of the process and the process.

Henze, Norte, Sather, Walker, and Katz (2002) offered a fresh look at the role of courage as a characteristic of leadership in *Leading for Diversity*. They reported leaders "looked within themselves and honestly confronted their own biases and shortcomings, and they did the work they needed to do in the world" (p. 17). In addition they added support in terms of "challenging the leader to own one's

perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs” (p. 18) by providing a framework to examine leaders’ life experiences and perceptions as part of authentic leadership.

It cannot be overlooked that there is a relationship between followers’ perceptions of their leaders based on strengths as defined by Social Learning Theory in terms of self-esteem (who you are) and perception (what you see) regarding leadership and positive outcomes (how you reward). As part of your strengths, what are your perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs? Maybe it is time to find out.

Lead With Your Strengths

Knowing your unique leader strengths enable you to gain a better understanding of yourself and others which, in the long run, cultivates achievement on many levels. There is significance in thoroughly understanding yourself in addition to others’ perceptions. Knowing you possess individual strength traits proves invaluable as you act on these strengths to positively guide decisions and improve your school system. Too often, we act in a leadership capacity by title alone; however, authentic leadership happens regardless of title. Leadership happens when you are a part of its authenticity.

Interpreting leadership behaviors to understand others’ perspectives of your leadership strengths is significant for your position. Perspectives from colleagues only enrich your leadership strengths. Drawing upon Blackwell and Cummins (2007) leadership research, perceptions of subordinates, or in the case of this study, students, points out that “self-esteem has a similar relationship to learning – that having a strong sense of self-worth and a good measure of confidence in their abilities helps people” (p. 46). Your ability to effectively lead others may be positively impacted by your own view of self-worth and authentic confidence level. Take the time to understand and appreciate your strengths and values. Daniel’s (2006) findings included a strong argument for the inclusion of standard leadership tools including “360 degree assessments, counseling templates, professional develop plans, mentoring, and coaching” (p. 44). But, Daniel also noted the importance of leadership strength traits, including vision, team work, integrity, communication, and action.

The Gallup Organization is a well-respected source for polls and surveys, including its popular StrengthsFinder 2.0 (Rath, 2007) on-line survey. Users complete a 15-minute survey producing a personal assessment of their top five strengths (traits) from a pool of 34 characteristics. This may be a good place for you to start your quest in identifying your own strengths. Honest discussions with colleagues may be another springboard.

As a leader seeking to model morality and character, it is essential that your leadership style makes sense of human complexities. Informed leaders inspire others while educating themselves as part of the continuum of learning. No doubt your shared values and expectations are seen by others; yet, just knowing the responsibilities for what you do is not sufficient. The bottom line is that you must understand yourself before you begin to make sense of others' complexities. The belief that perception is reality is relevant for understanding your strengths and what is expected of you and by you. Literature supports high expectations and action-driven skills vital to your authentic and sustained leadership. Such a simple word – leadership – is laden with expectations, morality, and behaviors. While you may hold the position via title or by self-perception, you should first examine all areas of your life before thoroughly owning the position. Your strengths lie within yourself. Know them.

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