

The Ambiguities of Effectiveness

Robert Hogan
Hogan Assessment Systems

Personality psychology, currently popular in I/O psychology, originated in 19th century German and French psychiatry. The early writers—Freud, Jung, Adler, etc.—set the agenda for the discipline and inevitably became the dead hand of the past. For example, they all believed that the most important generalization we can make about people is that everyone is somewhat neurotic, and the most important problem in life is to overcome one's neurosis. This is the model with which Positive psychology takes issue, and correctly so.

Data regarding the insufficiencies of classical depth psychology have been available for some time but attracted little attention outside of academic personality research. The OSS ran a selection program during World War II and in 1948 they published a technical report outlining their key findings. The most important of these was that childhood trauma is irrelevant to adult effectiveness. The OSS assessment staff noted that some applicants whose childhood was terrible were very effective undercover operatives, while others whose childhood was benign crumbled under minimal pressure.

Next came the results of Frank Barron's study of creative architects at IPAR in Berkeley in the 1960s. Barron identified three groups of architects. The first contained people who were universally regarded as truly distinguished. Members of the second group had worked with members of the first group but were not themselves regarded as creative. The third group contained architects like those who work for your university. The key findings from this research concerned results for the MMPI and the CPI. The MMPI is the gold standard for psychiatric screening inventories, and the CPI is the gold standard for well validated inventories of normal personality. The MMPI profiles for the creative architects were significantly elevated compared to the other two groups—they were crazier than the other two groups. But the CPI profiles for the creative architects were also significantly elevated compared to the other two groups—as their careers suggested, they were more competent than the others. This finding leads to three conclusions: (1) psychiatric inventories such as the MMPI are useless for studying effectiveness; (2) competence is not the same thing as an absence of issues; (3) positive psychology cannot, in principle, handle this finding.

Does this research hold any lessons for the study of leadership? Could it be that effective leaders are both gifted and flawed in certain ways? In a recent study of early American leadership, Wood (2006) reports that Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, Hamilton, Madison, and Adams were by any measure among the most competent men of their time—smart, well-educated, and rich. But all of them were immensely ambitious and obsessed with fame to a degree that most of us would deem unhealthy. Like Barron's creative architects, they were all talented but unhinged.

What about the modern study of leadership? All competency models have the same underlying structure, the same content. They look like politically correct wish lists drawn up by committees, and devoid of empirical support. The model of leadership effectiveness drawn from implicit leadership theory is empirically well supported, but represents a view of leadership from the outside, and again it projects a pretty wholesome image: effective leaders are seen as having integrity, displaying good judgment, being competent at some aspect of the group's activity, and projecting an attractive vision for their subordinates.

Our research on leadership, using our inventories of what we call the Bright Side, the Dark Side, and the Inside (see Tables One, Two, and Three) tell a more nuanced story.

Leadership researchers often distinguish between entrepreneurs and managers. Researchers have studied the links between personality and entrepreneurship for over 40 years (Zhao & Seibert, 2006). The evidence clearly suggests that: (a) personality is related to entrepreneurship; and (b) entrepreneurs and managers are somewhat different.

We recently invited 55 entrepreneurs, chosen on the basis of their success at growing a profitable business (a good definition of leadership), to complete our assessment battery. We then compared this sample of entrepreneurs with a sample of 8490 U.S. managers from a representative sample of organizations and business sectors. Earlier research suggests that corporate managers tend to be politicians, whereas entrepreneurs are more independent, self-reliant, and results-oriented. Our data follow that trend. The members of both groups fit the standard profile for managers and executives—hard-working, socially skilled, and self-confident; both groups are definitely above average.

However, the differences between the two groups were interesting and rather revealing. On our Bright Side measure (see Table Four), the entrepreneurs showed more self-doubt and a greater sense of urgency (lower Adjustment). The entrepreneurs were more abrasive, less compliant, and more willing to disagree with their bosses (lower Interpersonal Sensitivity). The entrepreneurs were less desirable corporate citizens (lower Prudence). Finally, they seemed more pragmatic and less visionary (lower Inquisitive and Learning Approach).

On our Dark Side measure (Table Five), the managers were more buttoned down, conservative, and socially appropriate. Conversely, the entrepreneurs were more self-dramatizing (higher Colorful), mistrustful (higher Skeptical), tough and insensitive (higher Reserved), risk-taking (lower Diligent and Dutiful, higher Mischievous), and less imaginative and visionary (Imaginative) than the managers.

On our measure of core values (Table Six), the entrepreneurs were more naughty (higher Hedonism) and substantially more risk-taking (lower Security and Tradition) than the managerial sample who, once again, was more buttoned down. These results replicate the standard finding regarding the differences between entrepreneurs and managers in organizations (cf. Zhao & Seibert, 2006). Generally speaking, the managers were smooth and socially appropriate; the entrepreneurs were edgy, pushy, and much less self-satisfied than the managers.

The entrepreneurs, who are directly accountable for business results, had the characteristics that modern research associates with leadership, whereas the managers had the characteristics that modern research associates with political skill. The assessment results for the effective business leaders (the entrepreneurs) parallel Barron's findings for creative architects—they have effective bright side personalities, definite dark side tendencies, and values consistent with walking on the wild side.

References

- Wood, G. S. (2006). *Revolutionary characters: What made the founders different*. New York: Penguin.
- Zhao, H., & Seibert, S.E. (2006). The Big Five personality dimensions and entrepreneurial status: A meta-analytical review. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 91, 259-271.

Table 1. HPI Scale Definitions (The Bright Side)

Scale Name	Definition
The degree to which a person seems....	
Adjustment	calm and self-accepting
Ambition	self-confident and competitive
Sociability	to need or enjoy social interaction
Interpersonal Sensitivity	perceptive, tactful, and sensitive
Prudence	conscientious and conforming
Inquisitive	creative and interested in problems
Learning Approach	to value learning for its own sake

Table 2. HDS Scale Definitions (The Dark Side)

Scale Name	Definition
Excitable	Concerns seeming moody and hard to please, being enthusiastic about new persons or projects and then becoming disappointed with them
Skeptical	Concerns seeming cynical, mistrustful, and doubting the true intentions of others
Cautious	Concerns the tendency to be conservative, careful, concerned about making mistakes, and reluctant to take initiative for fear of being criticized or embarrassed
Reserved	Concerns the tendency to keep to oneself, to dislike working in teams or meeting new people, and to be indifferent to the moods and feelings of others
Leisurely	Concerns seeming independent, refusing to be hurried, ignoring other peoples' requests, and becoming irritable if they persist
Bold	Concerns seeming unusually self-confident, having strong feelings of entitlement, and being unwilling to admit mistakes, listen to advice, or attend to feedback
Mischievous	Concerns seeming to enjoy taking risks and testing the limits, being easily bored, and seeking excitement
Colorful	Concerns seeming lively, expressive, dramatic, and wanting to be noticed
Imaginative	Concerns seeming to act and think in creative and sometimes unusual ways
Diligent	Concerns seeming meticulous, precise, and critical of the performance of others

Dutiful	Concerns seeming eager to please, ingratiating, and reluctant to take independent action or go against popular opinion
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Table 3. MVPI Scale Definitions (The Inside)

Scale Name	Definition
Motives are associated with....	
Aesthetics	an interest in art, literature, music, and humanities
Affiliation	a desire for and enjoyment of social interaction
Altruistic	involving concerns about others' welfare
Commerce	an interest in business and Finance gains
Hedonism	producing an orientation for fun and pleasure
Power	a desire for success, accomplishment, and status
Recognition	a need to be recognized
Science	a value of analysis and the pursuit of knowledge
Security	a desire for certainty and predictability in life
Tradition	a dedication to ritual and old-fashioned virtues

Table 4. HPI Means, Standard Deviations, and Independent t-test Results Comparing Entrepreneurs and Managers

HPI Scales	Entrepreneurs	Managers					
	M	SD	M	SD	t	p	η^2
Adjustment	26.16	5.67	31.43	4.42	6.87	.000	.006
Ambition	26.24	2.78	27.11	2.53	2.55	.011	.001
Sociability	14.89	3.65	14.56	4.52	-0.66	.512	.000
Interpersonal Sensitivity	18.65	2.68	20.28	1.45	4.50	.000	.002
Prudence	18.36	4.24	24.06	3.66	11.49	.000	.015
Inquisitive	14.24	4.31	16.82	4.56	4.19	.000	.002
Learning Approach	8.44	3.31	10.97	2.79	5.66	.000	.004

Note. AUS N = 55; USA N = 8,490.

Table 5. HDS Means, Standard Deviations, and Independent t-test Results Comparing Entrepreneurs and Managers

	Entrepre neurs	Manager s					
HDS Scales	M	SD	M	SD	t	p	η²
Excitable	2.96	2.56	1.85	1.91	-3.13	.003	.015
Skeptical	5.37	2.06	3.55	2.09	-6.15	.000	.055
Cautious	3.50	2.26	2.45	2.31	-3.19	.001	.015
Reserved	4.72	2.08	3.53	1.90	-4.38	.000	.029
Leisurely	4.87	2.41	4.08	2.01	-2.73	.007	.011
Bold	7.39	2.37	7.63	2.48	0.70	.484	.001
Mischievo us	6.83	2.15	5.28	2.29	-4.80	.000	.034
Colorful	9.02	2.60	7.31	2.75	-4.40	.000	.029