WHY DO SO MANY INCOMPETENT MEN BECOME LEADERS? (and how to fix it)

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candidate for a “strong culture fit.” They really mean that
the person appears to be part of whatever tribe or in-group
the hiring manager—and dominant group—belongs to.
Unspoken indicators for such strong culture fit may include
a person’s school affiliation (e.g., an Ivy League institution
strongly represented in the organization); technical back-
ground (e.g., engineering, law, an MBA); or religious
affiliation or ethnicity. Perhaps even more importantly,
social capital is usually confounded with a person’s socio-
economic status not just in countries that have historically
been quite explicit about this—India and Britain—but also
in those that embrace strong meritocratic ideals. For exam-
ple, in the United States, 50 percent of a person’s career
success is determined by his or her parents’ career success.
As recently noted by Matthew Stewart in the Atlantic: “In
America, the game is half over once you’ve selected your
parents.” The tight link between success and socioeco-
nomic level, of course, has not always been the case. Until
the 1970s, thirty-year-old Americans had a 90 percent
chance of earning more than their parents earned, which
is as close to certain upward mobility as you can get. That
figure is now only 50 percent.10

**Psychological capital**

Finally, good leadership requires *psychological capital*, that is,
how individuals will lead and whether they will make use
of their capabilities. To answer these questions, we need to
understand leaders on three core dimensions of character: the bright side, the dark side, and the inside of a person’s personality.¹¹

The bright side

The bright side comprises intelligence, which is a person’s general learning ability, and the major personality traits, such as extraversion and ambition, that account for individuals’ typical predispositions. This side reflects what people do when they are at their best, and what they usually do at work when they are making an effort to display their best character attributes.

According to meta-analyses of fifty years of research on the key psychological capital predictors of leadership effectiveness, bright side personality traits such as curiosity, extraversion, and emotional stability explain around 40 percent of the variability between leaders’ performance.¹² A separate meta-analysis showed that intelligence—which is unrelated to personality—also predicts individual differences in leadership.¹³ These findings do not imply that leaders must have all these traits to have potential, but those who do have these traits are much more likely to be effective.

Even a few defining bright side traits can make a big impact in shaping leaders’ footprints. Consider, for example, Nelson Mandela’s emotional stability, which explains how he could serve twenty-seven unjust years in prison and forgive his enemies when he was released. Or Coco
Chanel’s ambition, which enabled her to escape from poverty to create one of the most admired luxury brands in history. Or Jeff Bezos’s curiosity, which has made Amazon one of the most innovative companies in the world, and Bezos the richest man in history.

The dark side

The dark side captures less desirable aspects of personality, such as the already-examined traits of narcissism and psychopathy, that hinder a leader’s ability to build and maintain a high-performing team and contribute to the long-term success of the team and organization. Consider that in any industry at any given point, there is no shortage of leaders who are technically brilliant, well networked, who clearly have a super successful bright side, but who are nonetheless unable to control the counterproductive or self-destructive elements of their personality. As mentioned in chapter 3, narcissism and psychopathy are two dark side traits commonly associated with leadership, but there are many others, too.

In 1997, psychologists Robert and Joyce Hogan created a scientifically defensible methodology for evaluating narcissism, psychopathy, and nine other dark side traits that cause leaders to derail. Since then their related assessment, the Hogan Development Survey, licensed by the eponymous company Hogan Assessments, has been widely adopted to pinpoint leaders’ coaching and development needs.¹⁴
After profiling millions of people, Hogan’s data suggests that most individuals display at least three of these dark side traits. What’s more, about 40 percent score high enough on one or two traits to put them at risk for future career derailment—even if they’re currently successful and effective.

Dark side traits can be divided into three groups. The first group is the distancing traits—obvious turn-offs that push leaders away from other people. Being highly excitable and moody has this effect, for instance; or having a deeply skeptical, cynical outlook, which makes it hard to build trust. Another example is leisurely passive-aggressiveness—pretending to have a relaxed, polite attitude while actually resisting cooperation or even engaging in backstabbing.

The second group of traits has, in contrast, seductive qualities; they are geared to draw people in. These traits are often found in assertive, charismatic leaders, who gather followers or gain influence with bosses through their ability to manage up. Narcissism and psychopathy are in this group.

The third group contains ingratiating traits, which can have a positive connotation in followers but rarely do in leaders. Someone who is diligent, for instance, may try to impress the boss with meticulous attention to detail, but this attention can also translate into preoccupation with petty matters or micromanagement of the person’s own direct reports. Someone who is dutiful and eager to please those in authority can easily become too submissive.
The inside

The inside of leaders’ personality concerns their values, which function as an internal moral compass and determine how well the leaders will fit in with the culture of the organization and what type of culture they will create. For example, leaders who value tradition will have a strong sense of right and wrong, will prefer hierarchical organizations, and will have little tolerance of disruption and innovation. Put them in a creative environment, and they will struggle. On the other hand, leaders who value affiliation will have a strong desire to get along with others and will focus on building and maintaining strong interpersonal relationships and on working collaboratively. These leaders will not be engaged if their roles are too isolated and the company cultures are overly individualistic. Finally, altruistic leaders will strive to improve other people’s lives and drive progress in the world, so they will suffer if their organizations are purely driven by profits.

Summing up, if someone has the right intellectual capital, social capital, and psychological capital, they will have more potential to be a good leader. But it’s not guaranteed. Here’s why.

Leadership talent: personality in the right place

Even if the essence of leadership talent is universal, the context a leader is in will shape how they behave, ought to behave, and are evaluated.
About the Author

TOMAS CHAMORRO-PREMuzic, PhD, is an international authority on talent management, leadership development, and people analytics. He is the Chief Talent Scientist at ManpowerGroup, cofounder of Metaprofiling and Deeper Signals, and Professor of Business Psychology at both University College London and Columbia University. He has previously held academic positions at New York University and the London School of Economics. He has lectured at Harvard Business School, Stanford Business School, London Business School, Johns Hopkins, and IMD in addition to serving as CEO at Hogan Assessment Systems.

Chamorro-Premuzic has published 10 books and over 150 scientific papers, making him one of the most prolific social scientists of his generation. His work has received awards from the American Psychological Association, the International Society for the Study of Individual Differences, and the Society for Industrial–Organizational Psychology, of which he is a Fellow. He is also the founding director of University College London’s
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Over the past twenty years, Chamorro-Premuzic has consulted for a range of clients in financial services (e.g., J.P. Morgan, HSBC, Goldman Sachs), advertising (e.g., Google, WPP, BBH), media (e.g., BBC, Red Bull, Twitter, Spotify), consumer goods (e.g., Unilever, Reckitt Benckiser, Procter & Gamble), fashion (e.g., LVMH, Net-a-Porter, Valentino), government (e.g., British Army, Royal Mail, NHS), and intergovernmental organizations (e.g., United Nations and World Bank).

Chamorro-Premuzic’s media career comprises over 100 TV appearances, including on the BBC, CNN, and Sky, and regular features in Harvard Business Review, the Guardian (UK edition), Fast Company, Forbes, and the Huffington Post. He is a keynote speaker for the Institute of Economic Affairs. He was born and raised in the Villa Freud district of Buenos Aires but spent most of his professional career in London. He currently lives in Brooklyn, New York. His website is drtomas.com and you can find him on Twitter @drtcp.