Adaptive Leadership Perspectives

WHAT IS LEADERSHIP SUCCESS?

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What Is Leadership Success?

It seems that everyone has an opinion about what great leaders look like in action. But, one year's success story often turns into the next year's failure. A founder of a fast-growing technology firm seems to lose his leadership mojo when increasing scale and operational complexity outstrip his technical prowess and desire to control all aspects of product development. A demanding CEO of a large, global enterprise gets sacked by the board when overly aggressive globalization M&A initiatives and forced rankings of employees for performance appraisal lead to poor rather than enhanced performance. The CEO had a clear strategy, but just did not adapt to changing business and workforce trends quickly enough. But, why not and was his failure really attributable to him personally?

So, what drove the initial success of these leaders and what could they have done to continue succeeding?

This article explores what factors make leaders succeed over time and presents a situation-based approach we developed encompassing three **Adaptive Leadership Perspectives**:

1. A "**Leadership Foundation**" of critical competencies representing the behaviors successful leaders consistently exhibit;
2. **"Leadership Levels"** encompassing requirements and accompanying behaviors that contribute to executing major task, team, operational and whole organization activities; and
3. **"Leadership Styles"** articulating the interactions and stances required for meeting changing day-to-day work demands.

Unfortunately, extensive leadership research has led to few clear conclusions about what makes leaders consistently successful. Some research has highlighted that there is often significant variation of successful types of performers in similar settings. In contrast, many of the factors that do discriminate leadership success are not particularly predictive of excellent performance.

Why?

In part, methods for exploring the topic have produced differing points of view. However, the primary reason, I believe, is that leadership is the result of complex systems interactions which include:

- "Leader" characteristics;
- "Follower" characteristics;
- Situational demands evolving over time; and
- Organizational environment factors.

Both research and popular literature generally focus on selective parts of this overall system. In fact, sparse predictive data and the complexity of the subject have led some to conclude that there is no such thing as leadership. What appears to be effective leadership is merely "false attribution" attached to a figurehead in a successful situation. In other words, the perception that the methods a leader uses to produce apparent impact might be an outcome of an organization's success, not a cause! Does this mean we should abandon hope for developing a realistic framework for understanding, assessing and developing excellent leaders?

One problem in clarifying the nature of leadership is definitional, and unfortunately, even in research literature, the definition of leadership varies widely.

For example, some of the most common questions related to the nature of leadership include:

- Are leaders universally the named head of an organization?
- Do leaders always have a defined group of followers?
- What is the difference between leadership and management?
- Are there leaders at all levels of an organization?
- Do follower characteristics play an important role in a leader's success?
- Can leadership be embedded in an organization's culture, practices or processes, separate from an individual's characteristics and behavior?
- Will leaders that succeed in some settings fail in others and, if so, what factors determine optimal fit?
- Is leadership an innate set of skills or can it be developed?
- How do culture, systems and organizational environment impact leaders and their effectiveness?
- Do day-to-day situational factors, demands and context play major roles in perceived and real leadership success?

Each of the above topics has been explored extensively, creating an emerging picture of what makes leaders successful in various settings. Our review of the literature and related studies surfaced a common set of behaviors successful leaders demonstrate. *(See Figure 1)*

FIGURE 1:

Common Leadership Attributes

- Energizes others around a common purpose or vision
- Models key values and desired behaviors
- Challenges the status quo and encourages change
- Focuses the team on the right things to do
- Involves and enlists others to participate
- Builds and mobilizes a network of followers
- Generates personal loyalty from others
- Encourages, reinforces and influences others to perform and contribute
- Clarifies strategies and goals and a path to reach them
- Drives critical activities to completion

So, why doesn't identifying or providing development for individuals to exhibit these characteristics consistently produce successful leaders?

I believe these attributes represent the "necessary, but not sufficient" properties of excellent leadership.

If a significant number of these capabilities are lacking, an individual probably cannot succeed in many settings. However, even leaders very capable of performing all the actions in a framework may not succeed.

So, what is the missing ingredient? Based on our research, it is the manner in which leaders express competencies selectively in changing situations that produces most of the positive impact.

FIGURE 2:

Summary of Key Leadership Success Drivers

Leader Qualities

- Excellent leaders seek and thrive in situations in which they can exercise their preferred values, preferences and competencies
- Excellent leaders exhibit observable behaviors in interactions with others that motivate, align and enable others to perform and change
- Leadership behaviors must be consistently performed to build a foundation of trust required for meeting challenges and changing demands
- Leadership in different situations requires significantly different stances, focus and behaviors

Interpersonal Interactions

- Successful leaders rely on "conferred status or power" given voluntarily by followers
- Leadership is a "social exchange" based on "perceived" fairness of followers around the costs and rewards of assuming roles to reach a particular outcome or goals
- The main currency of leadership is influence through the development, accumulation, and mobilization of social power
- Leadership energizes or stimulates the motives of followers to act in ways that mobilize individual and collective capabilities
- Leaders who appropriately adapt their level of directiveness to the "readiness" of followers (e.g., "willingness" and "ability" to act) are more successful

Operational Interactions

- Excellent leaders consistently demonstrate the acquired knowledge, skills and best practices needed to drive critical processes and reach key goals
- High impact leaders provide structured roles and goals, the path to fulfill both, and clarity about the expected payoff
- Effective leaders maximize the availability of talent, best practices and expert knowledge throughout their organizations
- Successful leaders champion and provide opportunities for individual and collective change

Situational Leadership Drivers

Research provides strong evidence about the key factors that drive positive leadership outcomes *(see Figure 2 for key findings).* They divide into broad categories, but clearly indicate that leadership entails managing complex personal, interpersonal, and organizational factors versus simply the consistent expression of a set of personal attributes.

But, can situational requirements be captured and structured in a manner that leaders, and organizations, can apply realistically to define and adjust behavior? In my experience the answer is yes!

Adaptive Leadership Situational Dimensions and Types

In several thousand interviews and focus groups with successful leaders over a period of many years, we determined that there are clear types of situational demands that array according to specific dimensions *(see Figure 3 outlining **Situational Demands**).*

FIGURE 3:

Situational Demands

Engages people	Leverages Talent
■ Developing trusting relationships ■ Creating a team or network ■ Soliciting feedback or guidance ■ Developing consensus	■ Creating ownership or commitment from others ■ Coaching, training or advising others ■ Advocating for a position ■ Negotiating for something
Creates direction	**Manages Performance**
■ Researching or inquiring about a situation ■ Benchmarking or studying a topic ■ Creating a construct, framework or guidelines ■ Designing a product or process	■ Taking on a key responsibility ■ Leading a significant change ■ Resolving a problem or issue ■ Implementing a project or program

Situations tend to fall into the following **dimensions** in our taxonomy:

- **Interpersonal or Operational**
  (Situations corresponding to more people- or task-oriented activities);

- **Planning/Initiating or Acting**
  (Situations related to creating a purpose and defining requirements versus implementing activities and driving for results); and

- **Strategic or Tactical**
  (Situations reflecting demands at various organization levels and for many organizations demands corresponding to career levels or roles).

The dimensions are further refined into the following fours **situational demands** that **drive** differing leadership competency requirements:

- **Engaging People**
  (Encompassing situations related to interpersonal and planning factors);

- **Leveraging Talent**
  (Encompassing situations related to interpersonal and acting factors);

- **Creating Direction**
  (Encompassing situations related to operational and planning factors); and

- **Managing Performance**
  (Encompassing situations related to operational and acting factors).

Each situational demand includes strategic and tactical sets of work contexts that represent demands for specific leadership competencies or behaviors. For example, the strategic leadership intervention required for creating an organization vision entails visioning, enrollment and engagement competencies; while a more tactical leadership activity such as developing and gaining consensus around team norms and values depends more on interpersonal communication, feedback and influence competencies.

Leadership Competencies: The Foundation

The leadership attributes cited earlier are similar to what can be defined as competencies – groups of behaviors that distinguish excellent performance. In fact, many leadership models define validated sets of behaviors. These frameworks, usually encompassing characteristics similar to those cited in Figure 1, are useful since they highlight the "critical few" behavioral themes that drive excellent performance.

Through thematic analysis and subsequent validation of behaviors aligned to situations, we developed a robust set of leadership competencies arrayed according to situational dimensions. *(See **The Adaptive Leadership Competency Framework** comprised of 32 competencies in Figure 4).*

These competencies (and their accompanying definitions and behavioral indicators) encompass the overall set of actions leaders need to perform to be successful. However, each competency within the framework supports specific situational dimensions and types too. For example, a **Visioning and Alignment** competency with the following definition - "Creates and consistently shares a vision or picture of the organization that motivates others to superior performance," - has the following characteristics:
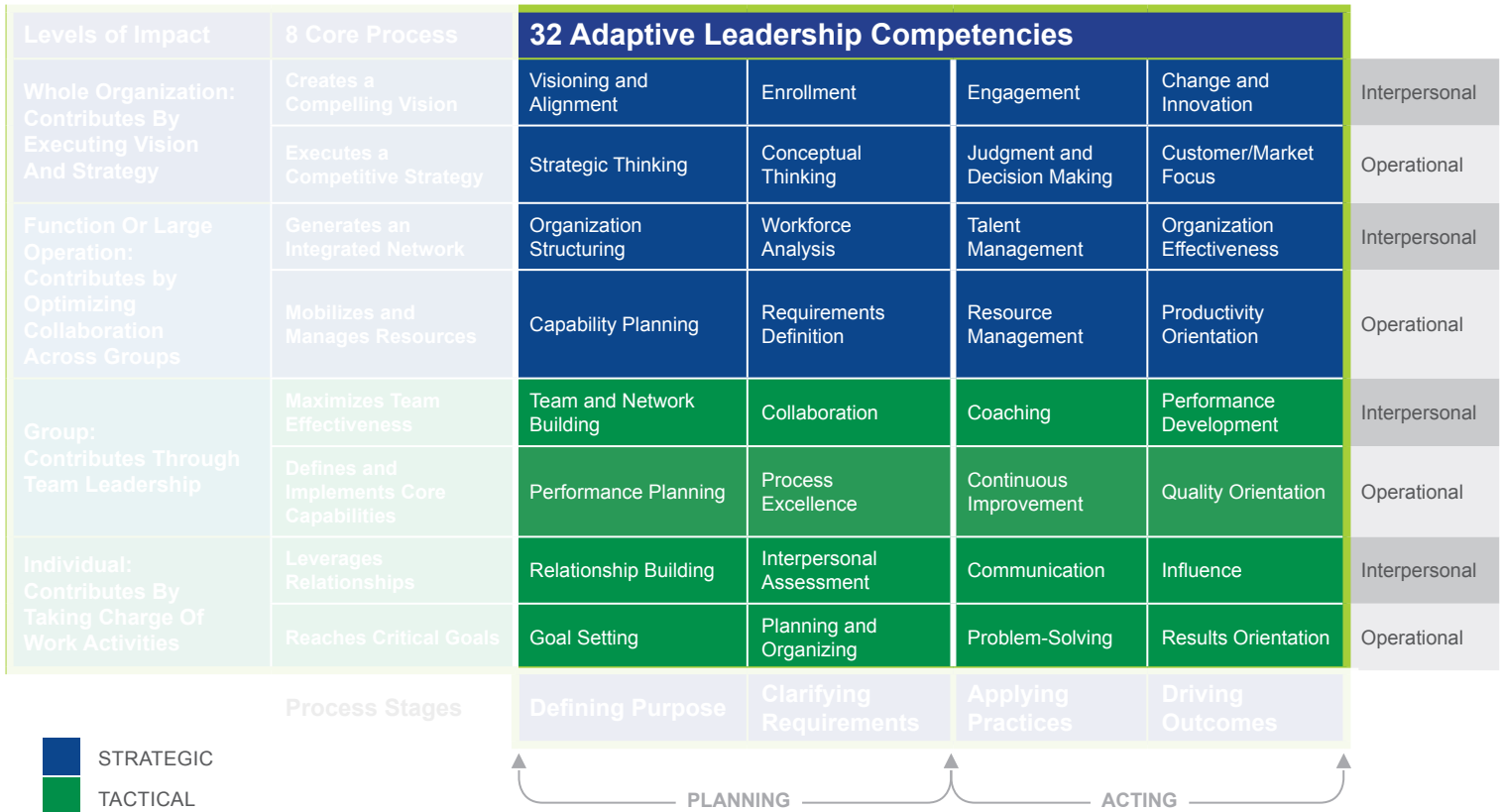
- It is person-focused.
- It is part of planning or creating common purpose.
- It is a high-level, strategic intervention

In contrast, a leadership competency such as **Planning and Organizing** with the following definition - "Systematically identifies the key requirements of a task and differentiates between what is important and not important." - has distinctly different properties:

- It is task-focused,
- It is focused on planning, and
- It is tactical.

FIGURE 4:

Levels of Impact	8 Core Process	32 Adaptive Leadership Competencies				
Whole Organization: Contributes By Executing Vision And Strategy	Creates a Compelling Vision	Visioning and Alignment	Enrollment	Engagement	Change and Innovation	Interpersonal
	Executes a Competitive Strategy	Strategic Thinking	Conceptual Thinking	Judgment and Decision Making	Customer/Market Focus	Operational
Function Or Large Operation: Contributes by Optimizing Collaboration Across Groups	Generates an Integrated Network	Organization Structuring	Workforce Analysis	Talent Management	Organization Effectiveness	Interpersonal
	Mobilizes and Manages Resources	Capability Planning	Requirements Definition	Resource Management	Productivity Orientation	Operational
Group: Contributes Through Team Leadership	Maximizes Team Effectiveness	Team and Network Building	Collaboration	Coaching	Performance Development	Interpersonal
	Defines and Implements Core Capabilities	Performance Planning	Process Excellence	Continuous Improvement	Quality Orientation	Operational
Individual: Contributes By Taking Charge Of Work Activities	Leverages Relationships	Relationship Building	Interpersonal Assessment	Communication	Influence	Interpersonal
	Reaches Critical Goals	Goal Setting	Planning and Organizing	Problem-Solving	Results Orientation	Operational
	Process Stages	Defining Purpose	Clarifying Requirements	Applying Practices	Driving Outcomes	

■ STRATEGIC
■ TACTICAL

⬆ _____ PLANNING _____ ⬆ _____ ACTING _____ ⬆

Leadership Levels:
The Strategic - Tactical Dimension

Mastering a broad set of individual competencies and applying them selectively in differing situations are both critical success factors. But, matching behavioral responses dynamically to fit the shifting focus, scope, scale and complexity of organizational demands is the real key to success.

Don was an all-star technical contributor and project leader. He was a master at all the key skills required for his area of expertise and he could direct other technical contributors to get challenging projects done. He was the prototypical "smartest person in the room." This led to several promotions.

Don had unparalleled energy and technical acumen so he was consistently successful until he couldn't oversee the work of everyone on his team directly. As a result, in his next promotion, to technical program manager, he hit the wall.

The new position required leading multiple projects that he could only indirectly manage. Deadlines were missed; project quality slipped; customers started to complain. Don's inability to select talent, delegate, and give credit to others was his undoing. Don had failed to change the competencies he expressed as his organizational position increased in scope and complexity.

Sound familiar? His company's sink or swim culture was about to label him a Peter Principle victim (i.e., he had risen to his level of incompetence). Luckily Dan had an enlightened manager who provided him with a multi-rater competency assessment, helped him focus on the new competency areas required in his new role, and coached him through this tough transition.

FIGURE 5:

Levels of Impact		
Organization Level	**Typical Roles**	**Type of Impact**
Whole Organization Level	Executive/Technical Strategist	Contributes by Executing Vision and Strategy
Function or Operation Level	Manager of Managers/Integrator	Contributes by Optimizing Collaboration Across Groups
Team or Group Level	First Level Manager/Project Leader	Contributes through Team Leadership
Individual Level	Experienced Individual Contributor	Contributes by Taking Charge of Assigned Work Activities

As leaders grow through experience they must master an increasing array of competencies that support activities ranging from strategic to tactical in nature. Leaders need to adapt how they behave to changing types of contribution *(See Figure 5 for description of levels or types of impact).*

Executing tasks in individual projects and leading teams tend to be more tactical endeavors; collaborating with and coordinating groups, and executing vision and strategy are more strategic in nature. In larger organizations, these types of contribution often represent position levels or career bands, such as individual contributor, team leader, integrator or manager of managers or executive. In smaller organizations, leaders are challenged to shift their stance to move across levels of contribution depending on required activities. As with Don's leadership challenge, it is clear that the actions leaders perform focusing on one level of impact can make them fail if they do not change behaviors as they shift to another level. However, the manner in which leaders change behavior is not so simple. Top performing leaders do not simply

shut off one set of behaviors and start new level-specific behaviors. Instead, they change what they do applying a number of strategies:

- They focus most intently on expressing the critical few competencies that drive performance for their level of responsibility or contribution;
- They suppress their expression of some competencies for levels below their current role and delegate and support others to perform them;
- They continue to perform some competencies for levels more tactical than their primary level of responsibility, but less frequently and less forcefully to facilitate relevant activities in which they continue to participate at that level (e.g., how an executive focusing on strategy runs a team or coaches individuals); and
- They adapt their behaviors related to levels beyond their level of responsibility to deliver value beyond their current role, expressing supporting behaviors for levels above and oversight, coaching and advisory behaviors for levels below their current role.

For example, in executive roles, the most critical competencies focus on characteristics that often impact the "whole organization." However, the most competent executives ensure that leadership competencies applicable across all organization levels are performed consistently by enrolling other leaders to exhibit them and by selectively exhibiting them in the following situations:

- When role modeling is required,
- When a specific situation requiring those competencies is their responsibility (e.g., goal-setting with direct reports), or
- When there are stresses or deficits in leadership at lower levels of the organization, requiring more active involvement in tasks previously delegated.

Leadership Styles

While shifting behavior to fit major leadership levels is important for broader responsibilities, adjusting behavior to fit local, day-to-day requirements is equally important. The ability to express specific sets of competency behaviors in concert to address changing requirements within a role we label - "leadership styles." A style represents a pattern of behavior that tends to lead to productive action for particular on-the-job work settings or situations.

Eleanor, a top performing team leader, consistently generated loyalty and a deep sense of trust in her team members. Her strongest style (called "harmonizing")

combined planning and interpersonal behaviors such as accurately reading people, building relationships, and fostering collaboration to create a cohesive team and develop consensus around and commitment to key activities. Eleanor was also able to motivate her team to take action through a style called "promoting," combining interpersonal and action-oriented behaviors such as communication, influence and coaching to motivate others to take responsibility for their actions. Her ability to shift styles according to the differing styles of her manager, team members, and peers was another strength. However, Eleanor had style vulnerabilities too. Her strong interpersonal skills often made up for task-oriented vulnerabilities. But, on occasion she exhibited tendencies to shortchange exploring ideas before acting and her compassion for others sometimes got in the way of confronting poor performance and driving activities to completion. *(See Figure 6 outlining the four styles in our framework, including strategic and tactical versions of each.)*

FIGURE 6:

The Four Adaptive Leadership Styles	
Harmonizing Requires competencies that combine Planning and Interpersonal behaviors and employs two styles or archetypes for the work context of Engaging People – one tactical called Organizer and one strategic called Visionary.	**Promoting** Requires Acting and Interpersonal behaviors and employs two styles or archetypes for the work context of Leveraging Talent – one tactical called Facilitator and one strategic called Champion. The skillful expression of each style also required demonstrating a set of associated competencies and accompanying behaviors.
Exploring Requires competencies that combine Planning and Operational behaviors and employs two styles or archetypes for the work context of Creating Direction – one tactical called Initiator and one strategic called Strategist.	**Driving** Requires competencies that combine Operational and Acting behaviors and employs two styles or archetypes for the work context of Managing Performance – one tactical called Achiever and one strategic called Orchestrator.

Of course everyone has strong and vulnerable styles. The leaders that are most successful understand their style capabilities and develop strategies for improving the entire range of styles required for team success, including increasing their own personal style strengths and flex and augmenting their capabilities with the complementary styles of team members.

Some of the most critical questions to answer about a leader's style include:

- What is my best style, what activities does it support, and what can it undermine?
- How much style flex and breadth do I need to adapt to changing situational demands?
- How can I improve my style capabilities to fit a broader array of situational demands?
- How can I augment my style with those of team members to make sure I can optimize my impact?
- What are the best strategies to identify and adjust to the styles of my manager, peers, clients, and team members?

Adaptive Leadership Perspectives: A Systems Approach for Developing Leadership

A final word about leadership. Many widely-applied profiles focus on sets of defined, often validated, leader attributes; and some leadership frameworks do encompass various situational factors. Our framework, focusing on mastery of three Adaptive Leadership Perspectives - The Competency Foundation, Leadership Levels, and Leadership Styles, supports a more holistic approach for improving individual and group performance. By applying a structured set of selectively applied competencies, leaders can enhance the depth, breadth and flex of their behavioral repertoire. For example, in major crises such as national disasters or corporate security breaches in which the readiness level of the organization is challenged, executives often fail to flex to a more assertive, expressive leadership style quickly enough to maintain trust and mobilize appropriate action in followers. Paradoxically, some serious crisis situations involving highly competent professionals, such as a major airplane malfunction or unexpected obstacles in a military operation, are managed best by shifting to a less-directive, exploring style of leadership that involves soliciting an array of inputs and strategies before making critical decisions.

By evaluating leaders and situations using this multi-dimensional model, organizations, coaches and individuals can explore strengths and vulnerabilities beyond personal attributes, providing answers to a range of questions traditional models often cannot fully address, such as:

- Is a leader focusing on the right work activities?
- What competencies and processes are most important for a particular work situation?
- Is a leader better at people- or task- oriented situations and how might that impact effectiveness in his/her current role?
- Is a leader better at conceptualizing, planning and starting activities or at implementing and driving activities to completion and how might that help or hinder his/her work?
- Does a leader's stance and style fit a current or potential future work setting?
- What synergies or conflicts might a leader face with a particular follower or group?

While a more holistic approach to leadership applying related factors and perspectives offers new insights about how to be more effective, leadership success is still a complex system based on myriad factors. Top performers consistently exhibit excellent behaviors matched to changing situations, shaping their actions and interactions with others in response to individual, team, functional, organizational and cultural factors. In most situations, excellent leaders can adjust to, accommodate or even leverage conflicts and inconsistencies. In some instances, however, environmental factors present such significant conflicts that even superior levels of demonstrated leadership behavior can fail to make a significant positive impact. Therefore, it is important to understand that individual leadership has limitations and that effective organization leadership strategies and development programs must focus on creating both competent individual leaders and an enriched, empowering talent management environment with embedded values, practices, and broadly-available opportunities for growth and continuous learning.

About the Author

Dr. Stephen C. Schoonover is the President of Schoonover Associates, LLC, an organization specializing in leadership and executive development, career development, talent management applications and competency modelling. He is a graduate of Harvard College and Harvard Medical School and was a practicing psychiatrist and Harvard Faculty member for more than 15 years. Dr. Schoonover has extensive consulting experience with installing leadership development and talent management programs with a range of Fortune 500 companies over the past 35 years.

Adaptive Leadership Perspectives: Framework Development Background

A robust database of researched competencies was developed over a period of more than 30 years by Schoonover Associates, resulting in hundreds of validated leadership competencies and related models. Diverse client engagements and more formal studies yielded a consistent pattern of themes associated with successful leaders. While these themes were an important start, the various leadership models we developed presented a key limitation in that competencies and associated behaviors correlated with success, but did not encompass situational factors beyond the overall work context or setting in which the models were developed.

To investigate what leadership factors beyond a list of behaviors make a difference, Dr. Schoonover initiated a series of studies to determine what situational factors have the most impact on leadership success and why. In 1987-1988, we performed a study on individually- and team-oriented competencies focusing on the following question – do competencies related to certain factors provide helpful guidance about how leaders might behave differently in various situations?

The study included a comprehensive review of the leadership literature focusing on situational factors, structured competency interviews, creation of an initial profile organized around potential themes or critical factors, analysis of ratings by a panel of experts for importance of the various items on positive leadership impact, and subsequent testing by rating performance of successful leaders in a pilot program and then across a range of organizations.

Initial statistical analysis showed positive correlation for the relationship between action- and reflection-oriented items, and a potential correlation between the people and task items. To clarify these initial results some items were re-written, some eliminated and others added based on the data. Subsequent analysis of the resulting data from the updated profiles yielded positive levels for significance using factor analysis of items and high levels of reliability for the following associated factor – person vs task and interpersonal vs operational. Based on this study, we developed descriptions and supporting materials for what we now call 4 leadership styles – Harmonizing (encompassing Planning and Interpersonal leadership behaviors); Exploring (Planning and Operational behaviors); Driving (Acting and Operational behaviors); and Promoting (Acting and Interpersonal behaviors).

Starting in 1989, we also began exploring the following two key leadership questions in a series of competency studies involving hundreds of interviews (including global participants) in several companies – do leadership competency behaviors vary consistently with changes in scope, scale, and potential

impact across organization levels and accompanying roles and is there a consistent pattern of themes that drive building competencies from one level to the next? Our subsequent competency studies consistently yielded 4 distinct levels for competencies and a common pattern of competency groupings across a set of general themes and associated competencies - dividing naturally into more strategic and more tactical leadership activities.

A critical transition occurred during this period. While previous engagements and research clearly indicated that situational factors are important drivers of leadership behavior, we determined that a consistent set of situational factors were driving changes in behavior of the most successful leaders as they responded to evolving demands. We re-analyzed available interview data and conducted a series of additional interviews focusing on developing "situational typologies" (i.e., themes or factors within a larger work context to which leaders were responding to succeed). Various sets of situational requirements emerged – macro- versus micro-environment factors (strategic vs. tactical); task-person factors; process initiation-completion factors; and personal adaptability factors (depth and focus of behavior vs. breadth and flex of behavior). Consistently applying these factors over time has led us to clarify various elements of the Adaptive Leadership Framework, including:

- Levels of organization impact and associated work focus area ((i.e., strategic themes – vision, strategy, networks, and resources; and more tactical themes – teamwork, processes, relationship and goals);
- The competencies related to each major theme and the associated phases or steps – Defining Purpose; Clarifying Requirements; Applying Practices; and Driving Outcomes;
- The differences in the competencies comprising each of the 4 leadership styles – Harmonizing, Exploring, Directing, and Promoting (our analysis indicated that individuals who exhibited each of these general styles were most often exhibiting either the "strategic" or "tactical" competencies related to each) and the more strategic and tactical "Archetypes" for each general style.

Finally, during the last year, we developed another level for our framework, focusing on foundational competencies and a set of values and preferences, by performing an extensive review of our database of competencies, a review of available literature on traits and values that support leadership development in different contexts, and by testing, structuring and validating the new elements of the framework with experts. Additional research focusing on the development of underlying traits or foundational competencies for entering an organization and on values and preferences that support work effectiveness in various contexts yielded a set of 8 Foundational Competencies and 8 Values and Preferences Types that support the development and expression of competencies that build across leadership levels.

The result is a more holistic, flexible framework for leadership that is based on 3 critical pairs of leadership factors – Strategic vs. Tactical Organization Levels; Interpersonal vs. Operational Activities; and Planning vs. Acting Activities. We call the resulting structure encompassing all of the above elements the Adaptive Leadership Framework; it encompasses the 8 Values and Preferences; 8 Foundational Competencies; and 32 Leadership Competencies arrayed across 4 Levels of Impact.

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