



LEADERSHIP PERCEPTION: SMALL VS LARGE BUSINESSES, THE TRAINING IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

Leadership plays a key role in the survival and success of entrepreneurial ventures. Most of the leadership literature emanates from the United States and was written during the second half of the 20th century. The samples studied were largely white men in large organisations. How relevant is the picture for small business? Is there a ‘one size fits all’ version of leadership effectiveness? If not, it is vital for today’s small business leaders who wish to be effective, to understand the expectations of their followers.

This research collected data from 172 middle and senior managers in Europe, Asia, South Africa and Australia. Two sets of data were collected, one identifying the ‘ideal’ attributes/behaviours of leaders, the other assessing the perceived effectiveness of current large and small business leaders against the same criteria.

The results confirm the relevance of the leadership literature, though in some cases the emphasis is different. The comparison between the ‘ideal’ leader and the reality of small business leaders suggest that they operate at below the ideal in the areas of self-awareness and listening to feedback but otherwise demonstrate the other leadership attributes. They also compare less favourably than their big business colleagues in the areas of vision and willingness to change. These are four areas of considerable importance for entrepreneurs to grow their businesses successfully. They should therefore be essential elements to any small business or entrepreneurship development program



Introduction

Leadership plays a key role in the survival and success of entrepreneurial ventures (Moore & Buttner, 1997). Most of the leadership literature emanates from the United States and was written during the second half of the 20th century. The samples studied were largely white men in large organisations. How relevant then is this picture of leadership effectiveness in a global context where most businesses are small and where women make up a significant proportion of followers (and leaders)? How relevant is the picture for small business? Is there a 'one size fits all' version of leadership effectiveness? If not, it is vital for today's small business leaders who wish to be effective, to understand the expectations of their followers. It is equally important for trainers to be aware of the expectation placed upon those they train and ensure that the required knowledge and skills are included in the curriculum.

This research collected data from 172 middle and senior managers in Europe, Asia, South Africa and Australia. Two sets of data were collected, one identifying the 'ideal' attributes/behaviours of leaders, the other assessing the perceived effectiveness of current large and small business leaders against the same criteria.

Leadership and entrepreneurship are two distinct disciplines that interact at various points but to all intent and purpose are not identified as being inter-related in the literature. An exploration of the literature has identified a number of key observations that impinge on the capacity of each discipline to contribute to the other.

Leadership and Entrepreneurship

Whilst the entrepreneur and entrepreneurship do not appear in the leadership literature, leadership and/or management as concepts do appear in the entrepreneurial literature. One can perhaps suppose from this that entrepreneurship is not perceived as a necessary part of leadership success, (which can happen in many different contexts) but that leadership and/or management is an element of entrepreneurial success.

Many entrepreneurial researchers use the terms management and leadership interchangeably and the term leadership features in very few entrepreneurial texts. This is significant for those developing curriculum for those entering small or entrepreneurial ventures. Many authors have described the characteristics of entrepreneurs: risk bearing (McClelland, 1961; Liles, 1974; Kao, 1991; Timmons 1999; Jennings et al., 1994), innovation and use of initiative (Schumpeter, 1934; Timmons, 1999; Jennings et al., 1994), desire for responsibility (Timmons, 1994), need for power (Hornaday & Aboud, 1971), internal locus of control (Timmons, 1999), personal value orientation (Gasse, 1977; Brush, 1992; Moore & Buttner, 1997), need for achievement (McClelland, 1961; Hornaday & Aboud, 1971; Liles, 1974; Jennings et al., 1994), and need for independence (Collins et al., 1964; Scheinberg & MacMillan, 1988).

Although celebrating an entrepreneurial text where leadership is given some consideration, Kao (1995) offers only a limited perspective and in no way encourages the concept that leadership skills enhance the success of an entrepreneurial venture. The implication of his comments on



leadership for an entrepreneur, is that the terms management and leadership are interchangeable and that little or no differentiation is available between the two terms. Timmons (1999) asserts that six dominant themes have emerged about what entrepreneurs do and how they perform. These include: commitment and determination; opportunity obsession; tolerance of risk, ambiguity and uncertainty; creativity, self-reliance and ability to adapt; motivation to excel; and finally leadership. However, there is no explanation about what is meant by leadership.

In term of tasks attributed to entrepreneurs, the literature is also very rich: creating, recognising, shaping, seizing opportunities (Timmons 1999; Gartner 1986; Silver 1983; Sexton & Bowman-Upton, 1991), business planning (Timmons, 1999; Silver 1983; Meredith, Nelson & Neck, 1982; Tate et al., 1979; Steinoff, 1978; Sexton & Bowman-Upton, 1991), team building (Timmons, 1999; Silver, 1983; Bird, 1989), obtaining venture and growth capital (Timmons, 1999; Gartner, 1986; Silver, 1983; Meredith et al., 1982; Tate et al., 1979; Sexton & Bowma-Upton, 1991), leadership (Timmons, 1999; Cammarano, 1993), marketing (Gartner, 1986; Tate et al., 1979), managing growth and change (Timmons, 1999; Sexton & Bowman-Upton, 1991), creative vision (Bird, 1989).

Successful entrepreneurs are those who are able to juggle many activities and role as the same time (that is, they are generalists).

Leadership versus Management.

In recent years there has been much debate about the differences between leadership and management. Cammarano (1993), Eggers (1999) and Moore & Buttner (1997) identify management and leadership as critical to entrepreneurial growth. Whilst much has been written over the years covering the broad field of management, many theorists acknowledge a definitional differentiation between management and leadership. Bennis & Nanus (1985) and Zaleznik (1992) propose the thesis that managers, *do things right*, whereas leaders *do the right thing*. Zaleznik (1992) develops the view that the differences between leaders and managers reflect different personality types and that some people are leaders by nature and some people are managers by nature. Specific distinctions between managers and leaders can be made as follows (Hugues et al., 1999; Bennis, 1989):

- Managers administer; leaders innovate
- Managers maintain; leaders develop
- Managers control; leaders inspire
- Managers have a short term view; leaders, a long term view
- Managers ask how and when; leaders ask what and why
- Managers imitate; leaders originate
- Managers accept the status quo; leaders challenge it.

Hodgetts and Kuratko (1998) in discussing effective small business management look at leadership as being either authoritarian, participative or laissez faire. They do not explore any other dimensions of leadership and see the process as essentially one of control.

What we see emerging from the literature is a dichotomy of opinions ranging from a simplistic perspective of leadership as something unique to certain individuals, through to an understanding of the environment in which leadership occurs and the capacity for any individual to develop



leadership skills through education and experience. What is of particular note is that leadership has many perspectives and that few authors converge on a common theme or interpretation of the impact and application of leadership to the business setting and particularly to the entrepreneurial setting.

Leadership Characteristics and Roles

There have been many different approaches to the personal characteristics of successful leaders. Stogdill (in Wren, 1995) identifies the factors associated with leadership under the following headings:

- Capacity - intelligence, verbal facility, originality and judgment
- Achievement through scholarship, knowledge, or athletic accomplishments.
- Responsibility as demonstrated by dependability, initiative, persistence, aggressiveness, self confidence and desire to excel.
- Participation demonstrated by activity, sociability, cooperation, adaptability and humour.
- Status whether socio-economic, or through popularity.

Kotter (1988) attributes the following characteristics to effective business leaders:

- Relevant knowledge of products, technologies, markets and people
- Keen mind, analytical ability, the capacity to think strategically and multi-dimensionally and sound business judgement
- Impressive track record
- Sound relationship with key players inside and outside the company
- Good interpersonal skills and integrity
- Lots of energy
- Highly motivated to lead and self confident.

Whilst the discussion of the origins of leadership and the personal styles and characteristics of leaders continues in many hundreds of texts, there is emerging a view of what leaders do, the roles/function they fulfil in any organisation or community, as opposed to personal characteristics and leadership style. Bennis has been a key writer in this area, but whilst the words may be different, many writers have identified the critical roles or functions of a leader. These roles or functions include:

Creating a vision, direction, goals (Gardner, 1990; Bennis, 1989; Kotter, 1990; Conger, 1992; Gardner, 1997; Mariotti, 1999) communicating with followers (Gardner, 1990; Bennis, 1989; Mariotti, 1999), motivating and empowering (Gardner, 1990; Kotter, 1990) affirming/ reaffirming values (Gardner, 1990; Freiberg 1998), aligning people - management of meaning - achieving workable unity (Gardner, 1990; Bennis, 1989; Kotter, 1990; Conger, 1992; Gardner, 1997), serving as a symbol (Gardner, 1990; Conger, 1992; Freiberg, 1998), management of trust (Bennis, 1989; Gardner, 1997), management of Self (Bennis, 1989; Freiberg, 1998).



The question then is - are these roles of creating a vision, aligning relevant stakeholders, motivating and empowering followers, managing self so as to serve as a symbol and engender trust, relevant to today's leaders? Are they in fact critical to entrepreneurial success? Does leadership, as suggested by Moore & Buttner (1997), play a key role in the survival and success of entrepreneurial ventures? If they are, do entrepreneurs have the personal characteristics to be successful leaders?

Methodology and sample

Based on the literature, a questionnaire was developed encompassing the attributes of business leadership as identified by Bennis (1989). The questionnaire was divided into two sections, each with 25 questions. The first 25 questions asked respondents to rate particular leadership attributes and behaviours, to identify the relative importance of these attributes to the 'ideal' leader. The second 25 questions (same attributes and behaviours) asked respondents to rate a specific leader that they admired. So the first section provided a picture of the 'ideal' and the second section provided an opportunity for 'rating' a well respected leader against this ideal. This section also provided an opportunity for qualitative data regarding their admired leader. They also had to identify if their leader came from small business, large business, politics, not-for-profit, military or other organizations.

The data were collected among 172 middle and senior managers of companies with a median work experience of 10 years. Respondents come from different countries with 57% from Australia, 16,3% from Europe, 11% from Asia and 15,4 % from the rest of the world. 61,6 % are male and 38,4% female. For the general 'ideal' characteristics, we used the whole sample. Regarding the characteristics of specific leaders, we used the sub sample of 71 respondents who identified a leader either in a small business (15 of them) or in a large business (56 of them). Gender, number of years of experience and nationality were entered as control variables.



Results

Quantitative results

Table 1 shows the ranking of the different general characteristics/attributes of the 'ideal' leader.

	Mean	S.D.
long term	1,3567	,60992
communication	1,3721	,58333
self aware	1,4244	,64896
trustworthy	1,4503	,70430
vision	1,4651	,66134
culture	1,5116	,72940
enthusiastic	1,5756	,71744
integrity	1,6316	,81092
optimistic	1,6374	,76512
feedback	1,7310	,76553
risk taking	1,7836	,77077
change	1,8070	,82116
sets standards	1,8246	,92271
sees globally	1,8471	,82140
not afraid of mistakes	1,8947	,79744
strategic alliances	1,9349	,84615
expects the best	2,0234	,83984
training	2,1047	,89219
curious	2,1337	,96707
rewards	2,1628	,84964
balances stakeholders	2,3412	,89777
patient	2,3779	1,00419
broad education	2,5380	1,05859
dissent	2,7574	1,04953
recruitment	2,8837	,92930

Table 1: Descriptive statistics – General Leadership characteristics/attributes

This data confirms much of the leadership literature. However, the significance of self awareness in leaders, to the respondents, is greater than might be expected from the literature. This has implications for the development of leaders and entrepreneurs in term of expectations from their collaborators.

We choose to focus on the 12 first characteristics in order of importance for the rest of the analysis.



	Mean	S.D.
long term	1,3235	,62116
communicates - specific	1,4211	,59252
self aware	1,7160	,79570
trustworthy	1,5357	,77299
vision - specific	1,4226	,63337
culture	1,4734	,72428
enthusiastic	1,3801	,57544
integrity	1,5706	,78315
optimistic	1,4201	,62284
feedback	1,9112	,97489
risk taking	1,6036	,76547
change	1,4503	,67879

Table 2: Descriptive statistics – Observed Leadership characteristics/attributes of specific leaders

In term of specific leadership characteristics for the entire sample, first results show that the ranking is different from the general leadership characteristics. In order to validate them, a paired-sample t-test is conducted for each of those characteristics (Table 3).

Paired sample tests

	Mean	S.D.	t
long term - long term	,04	,78	,69
communication - communicates - specific	-,05	,78	-,89
self aware - self aware	-,28	,91	-4,07***
trustworthy - trustworthy	-,08	,89	-1,13
vision - vision - specific	,05	,84	,74
culture - culture	,05	,89	,69
enthusiastic - enthusiastic	,20	,72	3,63***
integrity - integrity	,05	,85	,82
optimistic - optimistic	,21	,76	3,66***
feedback - feedback	-,18	1,06	-2,17*
risk taking - risk taking	,18	,89	2,69**
change - change	,36	,91	5,16***

***, $p < .001$; **, $p < .01$, *, $p < .05$

Table 3: T-test for general and specific leadership attributes



Results show that for half of the variables (long term, communication, vision, culture and integrity) there is no difference between the desirable leadership characteristics identified by the respondents and the ones attributed to one specific leader.

On the other hand, for six of them, statistically significant differences are noted. For “self aware” and “feedback”, the mean differences are negative. This implies that these variables are perceived to be less common for the leader they had to characterise than for the desirable, “absolute” leadership variables. For “enthusiastic”, “optimistic”, “risk-taking” and “change”, the mean differences are positive. It implies that these variables are more prominent in the leader they choose than the importance given to them from an ‘ideal’ point of view.

For self awareness and accepting feedback ‘real’ leaders are less likely to demonstrate these characteristics than the importance attributed to them in the perceived ideal. ‘Real’ leaders demonstrate higher levels of enthusiasm, optimism, risk taking and change than was perceived essential for the ‘ideal’

Small and large business sub-samples.

Table 4 shows the perception of the different leadership attributes demonstrated by our sub-samples of small and large firms.

	Small Business and Large Business Characteristics			
	Small Business		Large Business	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
long term	1,3333	,61721	1,2727	,44947
communicates - specific	1,4000	,63246	1,4545	,53811
self aware	1,7333	,79881	1,6909	,81360
trustworthy	1,4000	,63246	1,4815	,66562
vision - specific	1,7692	,83205	1,3273	,57910
culture	1,2857	,72627	1,4545	,71539
enthusiastic	1,3333	,61721	1,4727	,69000
integrity	1,4667	,63994	1,6000	,68313
optimistic	1,4000	,63246	1,5091	,63458
feedback	1,5333	,91548	2,0000	1,10554
risk taking	1,6000	,63246	1,6000	,78410
change	1,8667	,91548	1,4364	,60135
years	9,3333	8,38934	12,4464	8,80066
recode nation	2,1333	1,50555	2,2500	1,52852
gender	1,2667	,45774	1,2321	,42602

Table 4 : Characteristics for the small and large businesses sub-samples



Table 5 shows the results of the ANOVA for different leadership variables between small and large firms. The Square Eta shows the percentage of variance that could be explained by this characteristic.

ANOVA		
	F	Square Eta
Long term	,18	,003
Communication	,11	,002
Self awareness	,03	,000
Trustworthy	,18	,003
Vision	5,13*	,072
Culture	,62	,009
Enthusiastic	,50	,007
Integrity	,46	,007
Optimistic	,35	,005
Feedback	2,25	,032
Risk taking	,00	,000
Change	4,75*	,065
Years	1,51	,021
Nationality	,07	,001
Gender	,08	,001

*: $p < .05$

Table 5: ANOVA for small and large business

Table 5 clearly shows that for most of the leadership variables, there are no differences if the leader comes from a small or a large business. Only two variables are significantly different at the 0.05 level: Vision and Change. For both characteristics, the mean is higher for small businesses than for large businesses (see Table 4), which means that these characteristics are perceived to be less prominent among small business leaders than for leaders of larger businesses. Furthermore, this differentiation in term of size is not important to explain the variance of notation by the respondents, except marginally again for vision (7,2% of the variance) and Change (6,5 %).

Finally, the control variables, the number of years of professional experience, the gender and the nationality do not show significant results.

Qualitative results

In the qualitative section, respondents identified a number of attributes that they admired in leaders that they selected. Many of the attributes that they identified in leaders that they admired



reflect those identified in the study. However, they did appear to identify a difference in emphasis if not in kind, between large and small business leaders. Here is a summary of the comments that appear to fall into a number of groupings.

Small business

The ability to ***communicate a vision and direction in an inspirational way*** was much admired and included such comments as: sets a vision & direction, develops a common vision, a source of inspiration, persuasive, makes clear statements, active participation in delivering vision, explains his way of thinking and expectations.

Individualised attention, ability to motivate and encourage team work and co-operation. This grouping included such comments as: listening skills, trust and support staff, making the team believe they are achieving desired outcomes, facilitates cooperation from diverse people, good dealing with people, interested in employees, motivating, combines work with fun, excellent social skills, made everyone feel important, creates a team environment, friendly.

Personal characteristics of self confidence, self awareness enthusiasm and determination. Personal characteristics identified included: determined, self confident, able to motivate self, optimistic & enthusiastic, know own boundaries, energy & drive, overcome obstacles, Self awareness)

Values, honesty and integrity. Comments included: trustworthy, honest, integrity, high moral standards, clear values.

Management and technical skills. The management and technical skills recognized and admired as contributing to effective leadership included: specific technical expertise, rewards achievement.

Risk Taking. Advocates change, willingness to take risks, learning from mistakes.

Large business

The ability to ***communicate a vision and direction in an inspirational way*** was identified as very important. Comments included: visionary, foresees change, foresight, sense of direction, strategic thinking

Positive attitude to risk and change including: tolerates mistakes, creates/enjoys change, willing to take risks, not afraid of challenges, learn from mistakes.

Individualised attention, ability to motivate and encourage team work and co-operation. Caring, well developed interpersonal skills, creates a democratic feel, works with staff, understands/develops the organisational culture, empowers staff, encourages cooperation, motivating, rewards creativity, innovation and success, respects staff, mentoring role with staff



Charisma. The word charisma was used frequently when discussing big business leaders where it did not occur at all when discussing small business leaders. In addition to specifically naming the leader as charismatic other similar attributes were mentioned: Passion, Inspiration, Charismatic, Engenders loyalty

Values, honesty and integrity. Ideas mentioned included: outward focused – betterment of others, sets standards, trustworthy, honest, has integrity, importance of values.

Results. Many business leaders were admired for achieving results including: achieves/drives results, is successful, is respected, and has credibility

Management /technical skills. A greater number of specific management or technical skills were identified including: decision making skills, control, develops alliances, specific technical skills, mediates, excellent organisational diagnostic skills, thinks clearly through issues

Personal Characteristics

Personal characteristics included: is not afraid to use power, strength – doesn't bend to pressure, Self confidence, determined, pleasant personality, dynamic, enthusiastic, belief in self, kind, helpful, driven, physically domineering, broad knowledge base, straightforward, cool under pressure, has balance, lives life to the full, energetic, friendly, opportunist

Communication skills

Communication skills at all levels, public speaking, used fun and humour, good listener relationship between the leader and follower with the emphasis on listening, caring and respect. It also highlights the importance of values as well as expertise.

Discussion

The quantitative results show that the perception of generic and the characteristics for specific leadership is very mixed. If some of them (long term, communication, trust, vision, culture and integrity) are rated in the same way, others demonstrate different patterns, either negative (self aware and feedback) or positive (enthusiastic, optimistic, risk taking and change). It could imply that respondents are quite objective in their rating of ideal vs. real leaders. Regarding self awareness and feedback, the negative result implies that they are more demanding of their real leaders on these characteristics.

Regarding small businesses, it is not very surprising that few leaders from small business were chosen. Their activities are generally less publicized than large companies' leaders. In term of differences, the fact that there is only a small difference compared to large businesses leaders (for vision and change) is encouraging. Small businesses are always presented as different from larger ones in term of access to resources, financial, technological or human. At least in term of leadership characteristics, the expectations are the same.

The qualitative data demonstrate some interesting similarities and differences. Comments are made about the importance of vision, communication and setting direction, values, honesty and integrity. Personal characteristics and the ability to motivate and encourage team work are also much admired. The personal characteristics identified for large business cover a wider range of attributes across a wide spectrum of characteristics from self-confidence, determined, driven and



physically powerful to kind, helpful and friendly. Excellent technical skills also receive a mention. The willingness of business leaders to advocate change, take risks and learn from their mistakes is also identified as important.

There are two 'categories' identified for leaders of large businesses that are not attributed to the leaders of small businesses. The first is 'charisma' along with associated concepts such as passion, inspiration and engenders loyalty. Big business leaders are also admired for their success, for achieving results.

The qualitative data provides an insight into what is admired among today's leaders – and the range of required abilities is broad – from having sound technical and management skills, to a diversity of interpersonal and team work skills, a clear set of values to which the leader adheres, personal characteristics of determination, self confidence, self awareness and concern for others, as well as the well documented leadership skills of vision, communication and inspiration.

Limits and Further research

This paper gives a first exploratory insight into the perceptions of what makes an effective leader and the extent to which current leaders demonstrate these qualities. As the ways of defining leaders and leadership, even if they are grounded in the literature, we could first question the validity of the measures we use. The size of our sample does not allow us to use sophisticated statistical tools to refine the analysis. Furthermore, it could be interesting to develop a sample with more small business leaders in order to validate the similarities found in this study. Finally, as our study focuses on leaders and leadership, no links are made with the other organizational dimensions like climate and culture and the performance indicators. We could thus hypothesize that some leaders characteristics are more important in large than small companies to lead to an organizational climate or a culture oriented toward innovation or performance. Further studies in that area would be necessary to better understand leadership in small businesses.

Implications for Training

The results raise some interesting issues for trainers. The curriculum for entrepreneurs and small business managers tends to focus on either the practical or the conceptual. That is, the programs either deal with the function performed, how to do the marketing, raise funds etc, or with the impact of entrepreneurship on the community and the theories and models of entrepreneurship. Where does self awareness, seeking and accepting feedback, visioning and adapting to change come into this? Are these subjects that can be taught, or are they part of the process of teaching and learning? Self awareness, accepting feedback and adapting to change could be seen as interpersonal skills, ways of doing things rather than functional skills. What of visioning, do we, as educators, provide and opportunity for potential entrepreneurs to develop and effective vision, an ideal that they can 'sell' to staff, customers and financiers? Being able to articulate a clear destination that is meaningful to those who contribute to the success of the venture could be critical to gathering together all the resources required for enterprise success.

Conclusion



The literature appears to reflect the reality of the expectations of today's leaders, though the emphasis and relative importance may have changed. The differences between the 'ideal' and the perception of actual behaviour suggest that currently many leaders have developed many of the skills required to be successful, in some cases they evidence the characteristics to a greater degree than may be required. In two areas, however, leaders do not appear to be living up the 'ideal'. These areas are self-awareness and a willingness to listen to feedback.

The differences between big and small business leaders is also interesting as the data suggests that small business leaders are less visionary, and less welcoming of change than their big business colleagues.

These four areas are extremely important for successful entrepreneurs. Understanding one's own strengths and weaknesses provides the basis for being willing to accept feedback. This feedback could come from venture capitalists, staff, or customers. All are vital to business success. The need of a vision that can be shared by all stakeholders is of critical importance as a business grows. The discomfort with change is interesting, as successful entrepreneurs have to change if they are to grow. They have to embrace the changes required to enable a business to grow – possibly the most vulnerable time in an enterprises life. It is at this stage of growth that the vision and comfort with change become particularly important. Those who are successful become the big business leaders who are apparently skilled in these areas.

It appears that entrepreneurship curriculum and those who deliver it could have a critical role in ensuring that those who start new ventures have all the requisite skills.



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