

In Search of Leadership

Although early writers attempted to describe the characteristics of effective leaders, systematic investigations of leadership traits first began after the turn of the century. World War I highlighted the need for selecting and training effective leaders, and for the quarter century between World War I and World War II, numerous studies investigated the personal traits of good leaders. These studies are generally referred to as *trait studies*, since their primary goal was to identify the traits and personal characteristics of effective leaders.

A variety of methods was used to study leadership traits, and this variety is probably one reason why the results were so inconsistent. Most studies compared effective leaders with ineffective leaders or leaders with non-leaders. The studies were inconsistent in the methods used to identify leaders. Some were identified by outside observers, some were selected by the group via nominations or voting, others were named by qualified observers such as teachers, and some were selected because they occupied a position of leadership such as student-body president or team captain. The studies were also inconsistent in the way they measured traits. In some studies the traits were measured by psychological tests; other studies relied on observers to identify the traits they saw; and some studies relied on the individuals to report their own character traits.

In general, the trait studies were quite disappointing, especially to researchers who had hoped to develop a measure of leadership that predicted leader effectiveness as accurately as intelligence tests predicted problem solving ability. Because of weak results, the focus of leadership research shifted from trait studies to contingency studies, which examined more than just the traits of the leader.

Research on leadership traits should not be dismissed too quickly, however. Although the trait studies were disappointing, they were not worthless.

Several traits produced a significant difference in leadership effectiveness, but they did not act alone. Instead, they interacted with other situational variables to influence leader effectiveness. Four major reviews have surveyed the trait studies, and the results can be summarized according to physical traits, intelligence, and personality traits).