
Beyond the Leader-as-Hero: The ACE Framework for Leader Success

Dr Michael Walton
Centre for Leadership Studies, University of Exeter

Abstract: Too much belief in the leader-as-hero generates unrealistic expectations of senior executives and neglects significant variables which underpin leader performance and effectiveness. Based on a study of consulting assignments with senior executives, this article introduces a framework that can be used to assess the likelihood of leader success or dysfunction in specific situations.

The article draws on recent field workⁱ to suggest that leadership success is more likely if there is congruence between the leader's psychological make-up and predispositions, the internal 'state' of the organisation, and the external forces acting on that organisation.

The Leader as Hero: A continuing illusion?

In spite of a backlash in recent years about celebrity leadership - following the misdemeanors of hitherto 'heroic' leaders such as Jean-Marie Messier of Vivendi or Jeffrey Skilling at Enron for example - the love affair with the big personality leader appears to remain alive and well. I am thinking here of the high profile corporate executive positioned as leading from the front and on whom others are encouraged to depend for salvation and future success. Perhaps the appeal is akin to an addiction rather like smoking, or continuing to eat too much chocolate even when you know it is bad for you. Maybe it's the result of a heady intoxication that comes from consuming too much undiluted narcissistic spirit.

Maybe it is in our genes and about the psychology of the leader as an alpha male.ⁱⁱ Whatever the reasons, I deduce from my consulting experiences, readings and this research that an overemphasis on the personality characteristics of the leader can relegate significant contextual features - important to consider in examining the bases for leader success - to the background, and fuel unrealistic expectations of a leader's performance from those around them. Worse still the leader may come to believe unreservedly their own publicity as Maccobyⁱⁱⁱ amongst others has noted with, at times, disastrous results.

Indeed much of the literature about leadership presupposes executive success almost irrespective of the situation a leader inherits on their appointment. Constraining factors - such as the wider business conditions, predecessor performance, the 'figures', inherited company reputation and standing, and competitor performance - are all too often neglected or relegated

to a back seat when compared to the emphasis given to profiling a leader's personality and aura. Leader-as-personality is of course critically important but additional contextual and historical factors condition executive success too and need to be more explicitly considered in assessing leadership performance and capability.

The appeal of attributions

Of course whilst it may be simpler, more convenient and expedient to attribute the success or failure of an organisation to the behaviour of its key personnel, that does not mean that doing so is accurate or fair. Yet when success is not forthcoming, doing so provides a ready focus for disenchantment and a target for retribution should these be required or demanded. However, such a simplification does little justice to the complexity of executive performance and success, and can delude executives and observers alike into attributing organisational and business success to the psychological dispositions of those in key roles to too high a degree. Furthermore such an overemphasis on the attributes of 'successful' leaders may result in too little attention being focused on the conditions and culture of the organisations in which they function; contextual factors which may, in some cases, have been the critical ones that enabled them to be successful in the first place.

It is a common human trait to attribute our successes to our own actions (internal locus of control), and our failures and disappointments to other factors and circumstances beyond our control (external locus of control). Through this biased pattern of thinking we maintain and promote our sense of omnipotence and self-regard and we are able to divert, deny or discount contributions that we may have made to failures by attributing the disappointing outcomes to factors or people outside our influence. These reflections on 'attributions' are particularly relevant when examining executive behaviour since executives - who are familiar with and perhaps even addicted to success and accomplishment - will generally be self-programmed to continue being successful one way or another. Thus they may find it particularly difficult to accept failure or disappointment and so - especially if they are cast from a 'heroic' mould - we should not be surprised when they look for scapegoats or for 'adverse trading conditions' to blame for their lack of performance.

To accept responsibility for successes but reject responsibility for failure results in a potentially heady and toxic mix. Enticing military imagery reinforces the image of an executive in the hero-figure tradition and positions him (it is overwhelmingly a 'him') as a conquering force expected to prevail over his adversaries. This may in part explain the continuing appeal of militaristic approaches to leadership - populated by charismatic and transformational heroic leaders such as Alexander the Great^{iv}, Attilia the Hun^v, Nelson^{vi}, Patton^{vii} and Sun Tzu^{viii}.

Military leaders, however, are not immune to failure and they are as susceptible as the rest of us to absurdity, inaction, miscommunication and misperceptions with, on occasions, calamitous consequences.^{ix} They are also populated by just as many exceedingly successful non-heroic top commanders who are however less frequently written about.

Yet the desirability of the stylised, assertive, high-profile, idealised and 'successful' leader persists seemingly undented by continuing media reporting of high profile leader dysfunction. However, what are largely missing from such descriptive accounts of leader success and failure - both in the media and in academic publications - are easy-to-use exploratory frameworks through which a more ordered analysis, exploration and assessment of what transpired can be undertaken. Without such frameworks, attempts at understanding what underpins or triggers successful and unsuccessful executive behaviour are generally doomed to failure. Without sufficient analysis, some situations which are capable of being corrected and defused are destined to recur complete with the ensuing collateral damage which surrounds personal and organisational trauma and collapse.

'ACE' to the rescue?

One such framework - the 'ACE' model (see Figure 1)^x - was generated from reviewing case work with a number of executives across a range of organisations and sectors. It is designed to identify combinations of conditions that may contribute to, and possibly facilitate, dysfunctional executive behaviour. By assessing each situation using the three dimensions outlined below, the framework can be used retrospectively to examine earlier scenarios, and prospectively to guard against potential executive failure and organisational trauma.

The 'ACE' framework suggests that three sets of factors need to be considered when examining leader success and guarding against leader failure and dysfunction: firstly, the psychological and behavioural characteristics of the executive(s) involved, next an examination of the internal 'state' of the organization, and, finally an assessment of the changing external circumstances and conditions impacting on that organisation. Furthermore, the model proposes that each of these dimensions needs to be considered both separately and in combination to build up a more complete picture of the situation to be addressed, and the extent to which there is a 'fit' between them that may signal likely success, or a dissonance that could result in failure.

Crucially it is the combination of particular factors, predispositions and circumstances that can lead both to successful as well as dysfunctional and destructive outcomes.

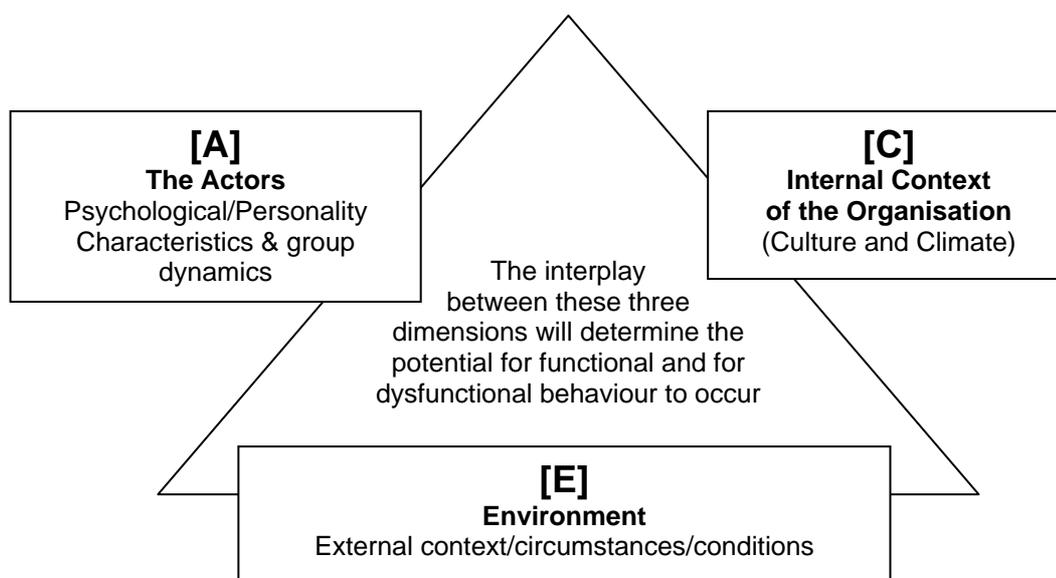


Figure 1: The 'ACE' Framework

Dimension 1: The Actor Dimension - the Executive as an Individual (the 'A')

This first dimension makes explicit a need to consider the styles and behavioural patterns of executives to see if they can match sufficiently the demands of the settings in which the executives are expected to succeed.

An executive's behaviour is critically important as it sets the tone and exercises a pervasive influence on thinking, creativity, decision-making, the handling of differences, and conflict resolution. In looking at leadership performance and organisational success, the psychological characteristics of the key executives are important features to consider - as are the leadership styles which they promote around them and those they penalise or outlaw.

Three leadership patterns in particular characterised the cases studied, which I termed as (i) 'Take-Charge' Leadership, (ii) 'Hail to the Chief' and (iii) 'Trust Me - I'm the Leader'. Each reflected different but similar leadership patterns that permeated the organisations concerned and gave clues about what may have been guiding the behaviour of the executives involved.

Whilst there is nothing inherently positive or negative about these descriptors, they describe leader behaviour in both successful situations and in those which deteriorated and resulted in significant organisational problems.

Whilst not mutually exclusive, they each have in common the presentation of a very strong sense of self, but differ in the effect the style seemed to have on those around them. For example the 'take-charge' pattern induced collaboration, a 'fight' response, and a general mobilisation of resources, 'hail to the chief' demanded more emotional reverence, narcissism and compliance, whereas the 'trust me' pattern evidenced a somewhat more exclusive, deferential and intellectually arrogant leadership style.

In general the following personal characteristics underpinned these three leadership patterns:

1. Executive presents with high face validity: offers grand and exciting plans for action in an assertive manner; remains however somewhat distant whilst presenting an engaging, high-energy, impactful and friendly aura.
2. Executive presents as very purposeful: outcome focused - likely to show displeasure over non-performance and non-compliance; shows a tendency to believe own publicity; may encourage sycophantic 'believers' and 'kill off' detractors and non-believers.
3. Executive shows an over-preparedness to be expedient to secure the outcomes/results wanted: results matter more than how they are achieved; some superficiality, style over substance in the drive to look good. Tendency to not want to hear 'bad' news and to shoot the messenger.
4. Leader dependence fostered, encouraged and rewarded; challenges and resistance to the Leader/ 'In-group' penalised; danger of emergent 'GroupThink' patterns.^{xi}

Whilst this paper will not venture into the psychological bases for such behaviour there is a large body of knowledge which offers more clinically informed perspectives on leader behaviour.^{xii}

Dimension 2: The Internal Context: an organisation's culture & climate (the 'C')

This dimension shifts the attention from the leader's behaviour to the internal contextual features the executive has to work with and on which their personality will impact. A consideration of an executive's personality and make-up alone – as with the leader-as-hero tendency – without reference to the settings in which they are placed provides an incomplete picture about their potential for continuing success. Contextualising executive behaviour and organisation dynamics in-situ is critical, as some settings will enable whilst others will disable hitherto very successful executives.

The internal context and state of an organisation provides the platform on which leaders perform and offers opportunities for, as well as restrictions on, their ambitions. A determined, achievement-oriented, high-flying director is likely to look for operational situations which permit and reward results, initiative and relative autonomy. Difficulties are likely to arise for them should they find that the organisation does not allow sufficient autonomy, personal freedom or scope to act and deliver as they would wish. A miss-match of personality characteristics with contextual features will probably result in increasing frustration and unease and increase the potential for dysfunction and subsequent leader failure.

Two conditions – which I have termed as 'Internal Fragmentation, Shock, & Disarray' and 'Denial, Delusion, & Complacency' – reflected the state and condition of those organisations where most dysfunctions occurred and which profoundly affected what and how matters were addressed, dismissed or neglected.

In one case the internal climate shifted from being results-oriented to one where satisfying the top executive became the main purpose, and where emergent issues were ignored, denied, or glossed over. Dysfunctional executive behaviour was encouraged and rewarded but this seemed only possible because the organisation itself was 'in shock', its past practices severely challenged and disrupted, and a new boss appointed who took advantage of the situation he inherited and which he had been appointed to improve.

Disruption or fragmentation of the internal culture significantly increased the likelihood of dysfunctional behaviour as established norms were disrupted or displaced creating 'cultural confusion' and a 'looser' and less regulated, transitory internal culture. Such internal disruption and dislocation need not, depending on the leader's behaviour, necessarily trigger further loss of internal controls or the imposition of new controls and order. Organisations in a transitional 'state' however provide opportunities for exploitation which in turn can encourage

a state of 'organisational lawlessness' whereby previously unacceptable behaviours become possible.

Dimension 3: Environment (the 'E')

A third dimension - the external environment - impacts on executive decision-making, increases the tension, and highlights the complexity of the dynamics and pressures influencing leader behaviour. Such pressures would include addressing and coping with media intrusion, managing City expectations & stakeholder pressure, responding to competitor threats, working within regulatory pressures & directives, handling the threat of an external inquiry, coping with violent share price fluctuations, and addressing reputation damage following a product recall or publicised ethical transgressions.

Pressures such as these will impact on the behaviour of key executives both providing scope for them to shine as well as to engage opportunistically in more disruptive, self-serving and covert behaviour which - on the surface - may appear perfectly reasoned, reasonable and appropriate.

Just one theme - 'External Crisis' - was the main descriptor I used to describe unstable external conditions which can provide both the opportunity and the excuse for latent executive dysfunction to be released. Consequently, in my view, an examination of executive behaviour is insufficiently grounded unless an assessment of an organisation's external environment is undertaken, in addition to the first two dimensions outlined earlier. We can have an executive behaving in exemplary ways but almost irrespective of what he does he will fail because of the external conditions affecting the business. Conversely we could have an inept and incompetent leader who, nevertheless because of the favourable external conditions, can be seen as successful.

Through viewing an executive's behaviour in relation to the external environment and the internal 'state' of their company, a fairer and more complete assessment of their relative success or failure can be reached.

Using the 'ACE' framework: Managing capability and commitment

The executives observed were competent, had successful track records, believed in themselves and felt confident that they could deliver what was needed. They shared several characteristics such as:

- high achievement and high power drives
- direct, purposeful in approach & reactive to situations
- strong self-belief, difficulty in handling criticisms
- a continuing desire to 'prove their worth'
- used to having their own way or their views prevail
- hard to influence and with a low tolerance for dissention

and, at the same time, many demonstrated ...

- a tendency for limited collaboration; little social attentiveness
- a more expedient than totally ethical approach to things
- more of a practical approach to matters & less of a perfectionist one
- less self-insight than they may have believed or professed.

These features emerged from re-viewing my notes of meetings, private discussions, the decisions taken, psychometric data, 360° profiles, and observations of them in practice. Whilst not every executive had every one of the features noted above, and whilst no doubt another practitioner would offer different descriptors to those below, this is how I saw many of them operating and would describe how they were functioning.

The characteristics noted above offer considerable potential for positive accomplishment and they also hold considerable scope for a misuse of positional power and influence. Whilst, in rapidly changing situations, such personal features are likely to be welcomed in a leader, they also increase the potential for dysfunctional behaviour to take hold, particularly if the organisation is too willing to depend on a 'hero leader' to take charge and solve everything.^{xiii}

Yet, important though such personal characteristics are, in retrospect the executive's success (and failure) seemed to revolve *less* around their personal levels of competence and behaviour and *more* around how they applied what they had to offer in response to the circumstances in which they found themselves. It was this finding that led to the 'ACE' framework being proposed.

In summary, the 'ACE' framework invites the reader to look beyond the leader's behaviour - and the personality projected - as being primarily responsible for organisational success or failure. It suggests a more rounded view should be taken that also accounts for the internal 'state' of the organization, as well as issues impacting from the external environment on that organisation. These three dimensions, in combination, will significantly affect (i) leadership behaviour and (ii) how successful or not the leader will be perceived to be in that setting at that time.

The three dimensions of the 'ACE' framework could be seen to function like the combination locks on a safe. If the three dimensions are in-synch then success is more likely; if not, derailment, dysfunctionality, and disruptive working may prevail.

To comment on this article, please email Mark Stoddard, Associate Editor, at: m.stoddard@mbaworld.com

References

- ⁱ Walton, M (2005), *Executive Behaviour-in-Context*, Unpublished M. Phil Thesis, School of Management, University of Bradford
- Walton, M (2007), 'Leadership Toxicity – An Inevitable Affliction of Organisations?', *Organisations and People*, 14:1
- ⁱⁱ Ludeman, K. and Erlandson, E. (2004), 'Coaching the Alpha Male', *Harvard Business Review*, pp. 58-; Nocholson, N. (2000), *Managing the Human Animal*, London: Texere Publishing
- ⁱⁱⁱ Maccoby, M. (2000), 'Narcissistic Leaders: the incredible pros, the inevitable cons', *Harvard Business Review*, pp. 69-77
- ^{iv} Kets de Vries, M. with Engellau, E. (2004), *Are Leaders Born or Are They Made?*, London: Karnac Books
- ^v Roberts, W. (1989), *Leadership secrets of Attila the Hun*, London: Bantam Press
- ^{vi} Jones, S. and Gosling, J. (2005), *Nelson's Way*, London: Nicholas Brealey
- ^{vii} Axelrod, A. (1999), *Patton on Leadership*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Press
- ^{viii} Krause, D. (1996), *The Art of War for Executives*, London: Nicholas Brealey
- ^{ix} David, S. (1997), *Military Blunders*, London: Constable and Robinson; Dixon, N. (1976), *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence*, London: Jonathan Cape; Hughes-Wilson, J. (2004), *Military Intelligence Blunders and Cover-Ups*, London: Constable and Robinson
- ^x Walton (2005), op.cit.
- ^{xi} Janis, I. (1982), *Groupthink*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin
- ^{xii} Dotlich, D and Cairo, P. (2003), *Why CEOs Fail*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; Hogan, R. (2007), *Personality and the Fate of Organisations*, London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; Kets De Vries, M. (2006), *The Leader on the Couch*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass; Maccoby, M. (2004), 'Why People Follow the Leader: The Power of Transference' *Harvard Business Review*, pp. 76-85
- ^{xiii} Hogan (2007), op. cit.; Kets De Vries (2006), op.cit.; Maccoby (2004), op.cit.