

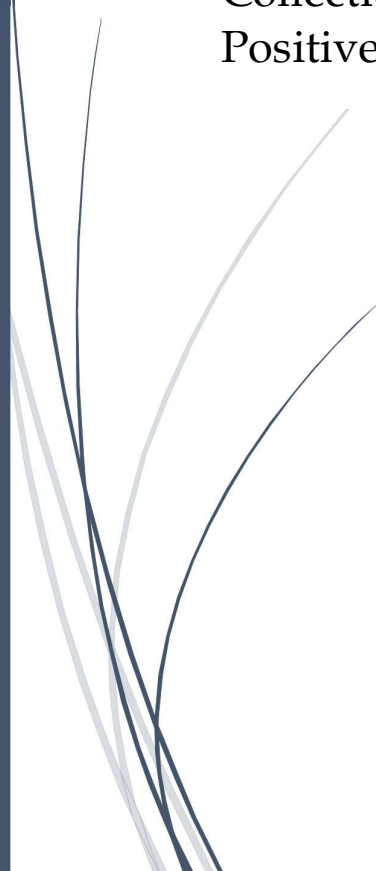


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The Role of Character Strengths in Effective Leadership Performance

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Introduction

There is a difference between leadership as a practice and leadership as a personal quality. One could define leadership as a practice as providing direction or goals for collective action that enables an organisation to achieve its purpose. Leadership as a quality is necessary to motivate, actively search for and successfully carry out leadership roles in a society (Peterson and Seligman, 2004, p. 414). Effective leaders take a *“personal interest in the long-term development of their employees, and they use tact and other social skills to encourage employees to achieve their best”* (W.H.C. Prentice). Therefore, effective leadership is concerned both with leadership practices and strategies and with developing personal qualities in leaders. This article will discuss the role of character strengths in developing personal qualities in leaders for effective leadership performance.

Key Definitions of Terms

Virtue. A good moral quality in a person (Cambridge Dictionary). Thinking and doing what is right and avoiding what is wrong (Collins Dictionary)

Character strength. Positive and measurable trait-like attributes and psychological processes that reflect virtues (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). Positive parts of one’s personality that impact how they think, feel and behave. (VIA Institute on Character, n.d.).

Self-regulation in psychology. The control of one’s behaviour through the use of self-monitoring (keeping a record of behaviour), self-evaluation (assessing the information obtained during self-monitoring), and self-reinforcement (rewarding oneself for appropriate behaviour or for attaining a goal) (APA Dictionary of Psychology).

Self-regulation as a character strength. "I manage my feelings and actions and am disciplined and self-controlled." (VIA Institute).

Self-control. The ability to be in command of one’s behaviour (overt, covert, emotional, or physical) and to restrain or inhibit one’s impulses. In circumstances in which short-term gain is pitted against long-term greater gain, self-control is the ability to opt for the long-term outcome (APA Dictionary of Psychology).

Leadership. Action of leading a group of people or an organisation. (Oxford Dictionary)

Leader. Anyone who takes responsibility for finding the potential in people and organisations and has the courage to develop that potential (adapted definition from Brene Brown, [www. brenebrown.com](http://www.brenebrown.com)).

Ethical leadership. Leadership that is directed by respect for ethical beliefs and values and for the dignity and rights of others (Wikipedia).

Management. The activity of running and controlling a business or similar organisation. (Oxford Dictionary)

Character Strengths of Leadership

In this article, two sources will be used when describing character strengths of leadership. The first is the ground-breaking work *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* by Peterson and Seligman (2004). In this work, 24 character strengths are divided into six classes of core virtues: Wisdom, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance and Transcendence. The character strengths are established by identifying core virtues recognised in every world culture and throughout history (Peterson and Seligman, 2004, pp. 33-52). The six core virtues and the 24-character strengths they established are still mainly unchanged, and the handbook is a fundamental text book for studying character strengths and is quoted in the majority of research papers related to this topic.

The second resource that will be used when referring to character strengths in leaders is *Character Strength and Leadership* published by the VIA Character Institute (Blackburn, I., Lemaire, P., Menard, S., Tremblay, S., 2019). This guide includes Peterson's and Seligman's six classes of core virtues and summarises the 24-character strengths applied specifically to leadership. On each page, a character strength is described, including an explanation of what the "optimal use" of a character strength looks like in practice and a description of "overuse" that can undermine performance.

In their character classification, Peterson and Seligman highlight the character strength of Leadership as one of the 24 on their list. It sits in the virtue of Justice along with the character strengths of Teamwork and Fairness. Peterson and Seligman define Strength of Leadership as "*encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done and at the same time maintain good relations within the group; organizing group activities and seeing that they happen*" (Peterson and Seligman, 2004, p. 30). Consequently, one could assume that effective leaders should have the Strength of Leadership as one of their top character strengths.

Searching Google Scholar and other academic resources on the Internet showed no results of research carried out specifically about the importance of the Strength of Leadership in effective leadership. However, a web-based study carried out by Park, Peterson and Seligman on over 100,000 adults from 54 nations showed the relative prevalence of the 24 character strengths across the globe (2006). The results of the research showed that the most common strengths in the USA were kindness, fairness, honesty, gratitude, and judgment. These top character strengths in the USA correlated with the responses from all the other nations. Interestingly, lower scores were found for character strengths within the virtue of Temperance: prudence,

modesty, and especially self-regulation (Park, N., Peterson, C. and Seligman, M., 2006, p. 125). According to this study, across the globe, Leadership as a strength shows up in the middle of the average profile, between Teamwork and Social Intelligence (Park, N., Peterson, C. and Seligman, M., 2006). This can imply that having the Strength of Leadership as a top character strength would not necessarily make someone an effective leader and does not have a great influence on leaders' outcome.

Sosik and Cameron suggest that the decision as to which character strengths are considered to be the most relevant in effective leadership involves assessing the leader's genetic and environmental influences, life and career history, and the demands of their workplace (Sosik, J. and Cameron, J., 2010, p. 263). However, they do state that some character strengths can be more appropriate in certain situations or environments than others. For example, strengths of perspective, integrity, bravery, and social intelligence may be the most relevant for assessing the character of top executives (Sosik, J. and Cameron, J., 2010, p. 263). The white paper *The Irony of Integrity, A Study of Character Strengths of Leaders* published by Centre for Creative Leadership (Gentry, W., Cullen, K., Altman, D., 2016), explores how these four-character strengths relate to the performance of top-level executives and middle-level managers. For a description of these character strengths see Table 1. They established that the strength of Social Intelligence was the most significant predictor of middle-level managers performance (Gentry, W., Cullen, K., Altman, D., 2016, p. 6 and 15). The Character Strength of Integrity and Bravery were significant predictors of performance for top-level executives. Both character strengths are necessary when making decisions and taking actions that might be unpopular, especially in a crisis (Gentry, W., Cullen, K., Altman, D., 2016, pp. 7-8). Furthermore, the research paper concluded that self-awareness, conscious knowledge of one's own character and feelings, is important for effective leadership. It suggests that, besides increasing their self-awareness, middle managers should focus on developing the character strength of Social Intelligence and the Strength of Integrity if they wish to climb to top-level positions. Self-awareness is even more important for leaders at the top of organisations and they should regularly seek honest feedback about their integrity, as blind spots can lead to failure and public scandals (Gentry, W., Cullen, K., Altman, D., 2016, p. 11).

The results of the research described above show that character strengths of perspective, integrity, bravery, and social intelligence play an important role in leadership performance and climbing the corporate ladder. However, one can wonder whether the findings presented could be interpreted too narrowly. For example, leadership is related to performance of executives and middle managers and climbing the corporate ladder. Thus, by some, developing the character strengths of perspective, integrity, bravery, and social intelligence could be seen as a way of fulfilling personal ambitions: promotion versus focusing on leader outcome. It also raises a question about the importance of ethical behaviour and the role of the other most common character strengths that Park, Peterson and Seligman highlighted in their research paper *Character strengths in fifty-four nations and the fifty*

US states (2006) such as kindness, fairness, honesty, gratitude, and judgment. Moreover, one can wonder, what role other character strengths such as humility and empathy might play in leadership performance.

Table 1.	Character Strengths & Leadership guide VIA Institute	Irony of Integrity (White paper) Centre for Creative Leadership
Integrity or Honesty	<p>Speak and act with authenticity Behave according to core values Say out loud what others are thinking Keep promises and honour their commitments</p>	<p>True to themselves Consistent, honest, moral, trustworthy Consistency in words and actions Act with authenticity and honesty Speaking the truth Taking responsibility for their own feelings and actions</p>
Bravery	<p>Allay worries and fears by staying true to own values, beliefs and convictions. Capable of stepping out of their comfort zone and trying something new Not backing down from a challenge or turning away from an obstacle Defending the interests of their team Share their opinion even if others do not share their point of view</p>	<p>Acting with valour, not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain Speaking up for what is right Acting upon conviction Take a lead on unpopular but necessary actions</p>
Perspective	<p>Ability to see the bigger picture Bring complex things down to a simple level and frame situations in a way that makes sense to others Drawn to projects where experience and expertise will be fully utilised See things from different angles</p>	<p>Change and strategy formation Generate ideas and plan for the future System thinking Make decisions for the long-term success of an organisation Incorporate competitor and customer views into a vision</p>
Social Intelligence	<p>Good at reading other people's cues and interpreting information about their motivations and emotions Insightful Adaptive to different social contexts and different types of people Instinctively know what motivates teams Capable of establishing context-specific strategies Comfortable in negotiation scenarios and seek out win-win situations</p>	<p>Awareness of one's own and others motives and feelings Adopt behaviour to build alliance, manage conflict and conduct negotiations</p>

Ethical leadership and the roles of honesty, humility, empathy and moral courage in leadership

A group of researchers lead by John Sosik from Pennsylvania State University carried out a complex study of how a leader's character strengths, self-control and ethical leadership relates to leader's outcome (Sosik, J., Chun, J., Ete, Z., Arenas, J., Scherer, A., 2019). Their study was conducted within the United States Airforce (USAF), which embraces the core values of honesty and humility, empathy and moral courage. The study chose self-regulation as a moderator variable based on the social cognitive theory (SCT) of self-regulation, an important aspect for moral behaviour, but also performance effectiveness and wellbeing (Sosik, J., Chun, U., Ete, Z., Arenas, F. and Scherer, S., 2019). They correlated the USAF core values to character strengths in Peterson's and Seligman's VIA classification framework (see table 2).

Table 2. USAF Core Values	Petersons and Seligman's VIA character strengths classification framework
<u>Honesty and Humility</u> Truth the telling Straightforwardness of conduct Adherence to facts Understanding what is morally right and wrong Consistency and sincerity in word and deed Accepting the truth	Integrity
<u>Empathy</u> Socially intelligent Confident and even-tempered Sensitive to thoughts and feelings of others Treating others with dignity and valuing them as individuals	Social Intelligence
<u>Moral courage</u> Ability to address moral issues Consider multiple values Endure threats Go beyond compliance Pursue moral goals Make unpopular decisions Admitting mistakes	Bravery
<u>Self-control as a moderator</u> "The capacity to alter or override dominant response tendencies and to regulate behaviour, thoughts and emotions". A trait	Self-control

underlying self-regulation of cognition and behaviour	
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The study was based on the results of different assessments and measurements¹. The participants in the study were U.S. Air force captains (Sosik, J., Chun, U., Ete, Z., Arenas, F. and Scherer, S., 2019).

The research concluded that in most cases the leaders' character strengths themselves did not predict ethical leadership. Thus, character strengths were shown to not have indirect effect on leader outcomes through ethical leadership. The exceptions were empathy and moral courage which had an indirect influence on leader performance and psychological flourishing through ethical leadership. Ethical leaders with high empathy were seen as effective performers by their superiors (Sosik, J., Chun, U., Ete, Z., Arenas, F. and Scherer, S., 2019). These leaders can be considered to have a developed signature strengths of Kindness and Bravery. Interestingly, the study does not consider the possible impact of the overuse of these character strengths and the importance of applying these character strengths in a balanced way (Golden Mean). For example, if considering the strength of Kindness: "I am sensitive, considerate and empathetic" to others (Blackburn, I., Lemaire, P., Menard, S., Tremblay, S., 2019, p. 21). However, if this character strength is overused: "I may find it difficult to be firm in addressing performance and behavioural issues, as the lines between empathy and sympathy tend to blur" (Blackburn, I., Lemaire, P., Menard, S., Tremblay, S., 2019, p. 21); for strength of Bravery, "I am a courageous person who does not shrink from threat, challenge, difficulty or pain." If overused, "I may fail to filter my feedback, which may sometimes hurt people's feelings. In some contexts, I may be less than tactful in my dealings with others." (Blackburn, I., Lemaire, P., Menard, S., Tremblay, S., 2019, p. 14).

The study by Sosik et al. (2019) also showed that the indirect effect of honesty/humility, empathy, and moral courage on leaders' outcomes (performance) and flourishing through ethical leadership were produced only when the leader's self-control ("moral muscle") was high. The study results are consistent with studies carried out by other researchers that claim that self-control is a core psychological trait underlying the majority of virtues. Self-control puts character into action for the good of self and others (Sosik, J., Chun, J., Ete, Z., Arenas, J., Scherer, A., 2019).

Interestingly, the authors refer to self-control as a "moral muscle" without discussing the character strength of Self-regulation (a synonym for self-control). This is due to the narrow definition of self-control in the study as controlling impulses to

¹ Honesty and humility were measured using HEXACO - 60 assessment; empathy was measured by employing psychometric measurement developed by Hogan (1969); professional moral courage was measured using the 10 item scale developed by Sekerka et al. (2009); self-control using the 13 item Self-Control Scale developed by Tangney et al. in 2004; leadership using the methodology developed by Brown et al. in 2005. Leader outcomes were measured using the 8 item scale of psychological flourishing developed by Diener et al (2010).

behave in a moral fashion. Peterson and Seligman define self-regulation as “regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one’s appetites and emotions” (Peterson and Seligman, 2004, p. 30). One can wonder whether by considering self-control or self-regulation as a character strength in the study would strengthen the research. This is especially the case as the title of the study indicates an interrelation between self-control, character strengths and ethical leadership and not merely self-control as a “moral muscle” and ethical leadership.

Both studies discussed above focus on attributes and character strengths of leaders in the corporate world and the USA’s army as a government agency. Would the same character strengths apply for leadership in non-for-profit organisations? In 2016 Richard King et al. carried out research to identify key attributes of disaster first responders and leaders with the aim to inform the development disaster health workforce (King, R., Larkin, G., Fowler, R., Downs, D. and Nort, K., 2016). They followed up this research with an investigation into the relative importance of 10 attributes identified in a prior study that are essential for effective disaster medical responders and leaders (King, R., Larkin, G., Fowler, R., Downs, D. and Nort, K., 2019). The research showed that the most important attributes of disaster medical leaders was:

1. **Problem solving.** This attribute can relate to character strength of Creativity (“ability to think of new ways to do things”) or Humour (“I create a pleasant, enjoyable and efficient work environment conducive to creativity and solutions for my team and my colleagues”) for examples (Blackburn, L.,Lemaire, P.Menard, S.,Tremblay, S., 2019)
2. **Decision making.** Can relate to character strength of Judgment (“Thinking things through and examining them from all sides are important aspects of who I am”, thus “I make sure I have all the facts before making a decision or taking a course of action”. However, in disaster response, the overuse can turn “thoughts into action may be overwhelming for me, causing me to overanalyse things to the point of total inaction”. Prudence, (“I reflect carefully on the situation and get a good read of the environment to manage the risks and impacts of my decisions and my efforts”). However, an overuse of this character strength may “slow deliberate approach to decision-making may mean I miss out on certain opportunities”) (Blackburn, L.,Lemaire, P.Menard, S.,Tremblay, S., 2019).
3. **Communication skills.** One can relate this attribute to the strength of Social Intelligence: “at my best, I am good at reading other people’s cues and interpreting information about their motivations and emotions”. An overuse of this strength: “I may misread people or be oversensitive to what they are feeling. I sometimes spend so much time thinking of potential impacts that I am slow to make decisions and too cautious in my actions”. (Blackburn, L.,Lemaire, P.Menard, S.,Tremblay, S., 2019).

For emergency responders the highest ranked attributes were:

1. Teamwork, that can relate to Virtue of Justice and character strength of Teamwork, Fairness and Leadership
2. Interpersonal skills, that can relate to the virtue of Humanity and strengths of Love, Kindness and Social intelligence.
3. Staying calm and cool when required. This attribute can correspond to the virtue of Courage with strengths of Bravery, Perseverance, Honesty and Zest, and the virtue of Temperance with strengths of Forgiveness, Humility, Prudence and Self-regulation.

King et al. suggest that these attributes should be considered in recruitment and training in disaster responders. However, the priorities given to each attribute may vary by role (King, R., Larkin, G., Fowler, R., Downs, D. and Nort, K., 2019).

Conclusion

No research is available about how leadership's character strength specifically impacts effective leadership. However, research shows that across populations around the globe Leadership as a strength consistently shows up in the middle of the average profile. Thus, one can assume that most leaders will not have the Character Strength of Leadership as one of their top character strengths, and that it has no significant relevance in effective leadership. To prove or disapprove this assumption more research is required.

Research shows that there are four-character strengths that are important for effective leadership in the corporate world, especially for middle level managers and executives: integrity, social intelligence, bravery and self-control. In this, self-awareness plays a significant role. While these four-character strengths can be recognised as important for effective leadership performance in the corporate world, they cannot be separated from the personal attributes and ethical behaviour of leaders, or from their life experience, socioeconomic conditions and connection to cultural values.

Scholarly research in other areas such as disaster response, highlighted different attributes and character strengths required in leadership, such as the strengths of Teamwork, Fairness, and Social Intelligence. These show that there are no unique top character strengths for leadership performance. Instead, there are character strengths that leaders might be expected to demonstrate depending on the nature of their work, influenced by social and organisational norms and expectations.

Furthermore, leader's character strengths by themselves did not predict ethical leadership or effective leadership performance. However, the combination of ethical leadership with high self-control puts character into action for the good of others as well as oneself (Sosik, J., Chun, U., Ete, Z., Arenas, F. and Scherer, S., 2019). Only

then character strengths have an indirect effect on leadership performance and flourishing.

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