



RESEARCH

ST LEADERSHIP STUDY

HOGAN PERSONALITY INVENTORY (HPI): AMBITION

by Jamie Estes, September 2020

In the Hogan model, **Ambition** measures the degree to which a person seems socially self-confident, leader-like, competitive, and energetic. In our leadership study, *Ambition* was the second highest scale across the 247 heads of school surveyed with an average score near the 60th percentile. Given that ambitious people tend to seek leadership roles, it is not surprising that heads of schools, in general, score above average on this scale.

As with all the Hogan scales, being at either end of the *Ambition* scale presents benefits and challenges. High-ambition people are more likely to take initiative and be persistent in completing difficult tasks. They come across as self-confident and comfortable when presenting their ideas in front of groups. High ambition can help compensate for other personality scale challenges because an ambitious person is motivated to overcome all challenges, internal and external. For instance, naturally disorganized people who are high in ambition will likely construct compensatory strategies for keeping themselves on schedule. High-ambition people simply achieve more for their institutions because, as we will examine in more detail later, they are internally motivated to do so.

Conversely, high-ambition people can alienate their peers. They may assume they have all the answers and may not be perceived as good team players. High-ambition people tend to become restless if they do not see a clear path to promotion and may move more often in their careers. They may also engage in “projects for promotion,” initiatives that are more about promoting the person than moving the institution forward. These projects tend to die after the ambitious person leaves because they lack broad-based support. High-ambition leaders may leave their staff feeling fatigued, and they are less likely to use collaborative approaches to school improvement.

Low-ambition people, on the other hand, are more typically seen as grassroots leaders. They are less likely to engage in political behavior and tend to be more cooperative, considerate leaders. They set realistic, attainable goals. If a high-ambition leader is the hare, the low-ambition leader is the tortoise. Because of their tendency to use a collaborative, incremental leadership style, low-ambition leaders can be accused of being unassertive, indecisive, or satisfied with the status quo. Less ambitious people are less likely to be tapped for leadership by those above them. Instead, they may be pushed into leadership by those around them because of the trust they engender.

As with all the scales, the heads who participated in our study showed the full range of scores on ambition, including several with single digit scores. However, seven times as many heads scored above 90 as scored below 10.

AMBITION IN PRACTICE

INTERVIEWS WITH HEADS OF SCHOOLS

Below are lightly edited conversations with two heads of school, one who scored high on the *Ambition* scale and one who scored low. We hope these conversations will help you understand the scales even better.

HIGH AMBITION

Were you surprised by your high Ambition score?

I was not at all surprised.

When you are working as part of a team and even as the titled leader of the team, what roles do you often find yourself taking on (facilitator, decider, mediator, cheerleader, consolidator)?

I have been a natural leader my entire life. I was the captain of teams and the president of associations from a very early age. I feel, however, that I am still a leader through consensus. I am able to change my mind based on input. I prefer to work as part of a team rather than as a dictator. My teams know that I will make the final decision, but they also know they will be heard. That said, I am aware of the fact that I talk a lot and I will get my opinions across. Nobody on my team has to wonder what I am thinking. I have always been that way.

When you must address poor performance, do you find yourself confronting those situations head on or taking a more nuanced approach?

I hate dealing with these issues because I do consider myself relationship oriented. I will gather feedback, but I will do what needs to get done. I know that poor performance affects the entire team and that my first responsibility is to make sure the school is fulfilling its mission for kids.

What traits, particularly in relation to ambition, do you tend to seek out on your leadership team?

A lot of the people on my team are pretty similar to me. At least five are definitely high ambition, but two are a bit lower on the ambition scale. I try to find people who are complementary to my style, but I probably tend towards hiring ambitious people.

Do you ever feel like your need to do what is best for the school conflicts with getting along with others?

I definitely see the side of me that wants to do what is right for the institution winning out over the interpersonal side more often than not. When I think about my success, I think the most important piece is supreme confidence. People are angry about things all the time in a school, and you can't internalize that anger as head of school. You can't take that stuff home. If you do, it will crush you.

How else do you think your level of ambition has impacted your career?

I was a young supervisor in my corporate career, and I was a young head of school. I have known what I wanted from an early age, and I have been willing to ask for it. Something that is specific to me is that I would never want to lead a school other than the one I currently lead, my alma mater. It is in my heart and in my soul.



People know that I love this school and they never doubt my motivations. If someone really, really loves their school, that passion drives them more than anything else.

LOW AMBITION

Were you surprised by your low Ambition score?

I was surprised a little bit. I do consider myself highly collaborative, perhaps to a fault. I believe we are in a highly disruptive time and there are cracks in the authoritarian systems that have existed before. I believe leadership now has to overcome fragmentation through building community and opening lines of communication between groups. Every staff member is part of a collaborative team.

I have never been ambitious about money or status or title. I have been driven by love of the institution where I have spent my entire career. I am calm, and I like to talk through issues with teams. I believe that we will be better after this disruptive time because I am optimistic about people.

When you are working as part of team and even as the titled leader of the team, what roles do you often find yourself taking on (facilitator, decider, mediator, cheerleader, consolidator)?

When I am in the facilitator role, I see my job as to provide a clear question to answer, a clear timeline for when to answer it, and clear boundaries/guardrails so that the problem remains answerable. The problem in school work is that the job is never done. There can be a sense of never having gotten anything done, so I provide realistic milestones so folks know what they have achieved. I also see my role as dispelling myths, kindly but firmly. For example, we had a really cool group last year that was dealing with HR issues. At one point, someone said, "Well, we all know women are paid 80 cents on the dollar." I had to show them the data that showed we did not have that disparity at our school, so that was not background noise we had to deal with.

I also give my teams lots of positive feedback. Half the battle is not having a sense of where I want the group to get but allowing the group to get where they want to get. I could sit in my office all day and dream of paths forward, but if I can't get people on that path, I would not have accomplished anything.

To be honest, I was probably more top-down 10 years ago than I am today. I have learned a lot.

When you have to address poor performance, do you find yourself confronting those situations head on or taking a more nuanced approach?

This is an area I have had tremendous growth in. Three years ago, I probably tended towards the nuanced approach. I am much more forthright and direct now. I have codified expectations. I remain a cheerleader, but I am also clearer about the non-negotiables. I have always been cognizant of shades of gray. I do not make decisions in a vacuum. I will factor in what's going on in teachers' lives or the things they are doing well. That might slow me down when addressing poor performance. Now, I have found a way to celebrate what someone is doing well while being clear about the areas that have to improve. This system we have now came out of the collaborative work of teams, not surprisingly. The team set the minimums and made a one-page list of expectations for teachers. It's not the most inspirational document, but it's good to have these pieces down in black and white.

What traits, particularly in relation to Ambition, do you tend to seek out on your leadership team?

It's pretty simple. I want to see people who like kids. I am much more inclined to hire positive, happy people. I want people who have a sense of wonder. I do not want sergeants who are just good at executing plans. I like

big-picture thinkers more than narrowly focused people. I don't just want people like me, but I do want people who connect with kids. I do not want an Eeyore on the team because they drag people down. I do not want someone who doesn't see gray. Unfortunately, I see more and more applicants who struggle with seeing the middle tones, who just want the world to be black and white.

Do you ever feel like your need to do what is best for the school is in conflict with getting along with others?

Meaning and belonging are probably the most important things to me. I have derived meaning from being a part of this school community.

That said, I do feel tremendous tension between getting along with my team and holding my team to a really high standard. The most difficult situations are those people who are good in seven areas but weak in two and figuring out how to get that person where they need to be in those two areas.

How else do you think your level of ambition has impacted your career?

In terms of social anxiety, I love talking to each person one-on-one. I'm not driven, however, to pull myself away from one conversation to make sure I talk to a dozen people. It's more important to me to be thought of as thoughtful than anything else.

I have tremendous loyalty to my school. When I was in my 30's, my head of school told me that he wanted me to succeed him as Head of School, but that it might not happen for 20 years. Over the next 20 years, I moved up through the administrative ranks before becoming Head of School.

Each new role was full of wonder for me. I have loved each job I have had, and I have never been in a hurry to get to the next one. I feel like I start to hit my stride about three years into any job. The first three years as head were tough for a lot of reasons. Now that I am past that mark as head, I am much more confident.



SPECIAL TOPIC

AGE AT FIRST HEADSHIP

One of the most fascinating components of the leadership study was the opportunity to look at personality data as it relates to different demographic groups within our larger cohort of heads. Though we speculate on what some of these differences suggest, we know that we cannot draw hard conclusions. We cannot easily separate correlation and causation, and we recognize that data can be more unreliable where comparison groups are unequal in size. However, we consider these pieces worth sharing, and we hope to continue our research, both quantitatively and qualitatively, to better understand some of these key issues.

This week, we explore the personality differences between heads of school based on their ages when they became head for the first time.

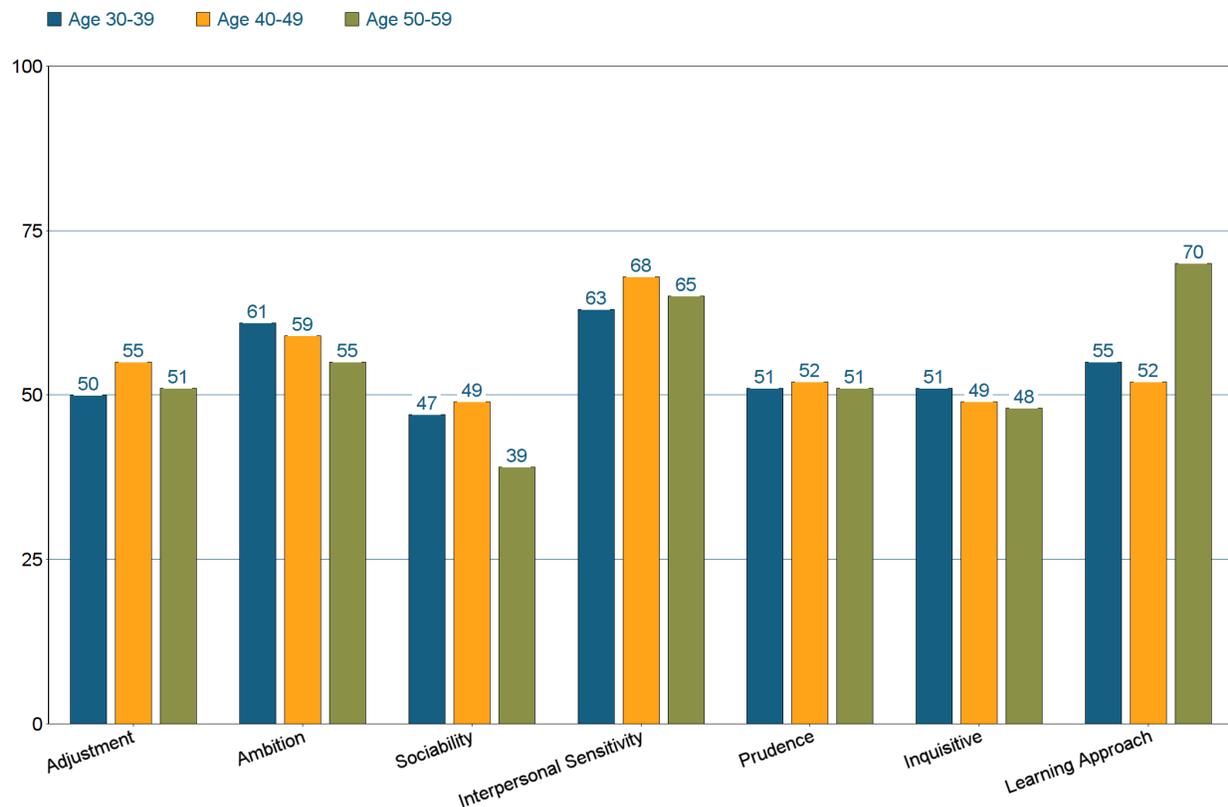
Participants have been arranged demographically in the following manner. N equals the number of participants.

AGE 30-39 (N=94)

AGE 40-49 (N=103)

AGE 50-59 (N=40)

HPI Comparisons: Age at First Headship



CONCLUSIONS

These three groups are quite similar in terms of *Adjustment*, *Interpersonal Sensitivity*, *Prudence*, and *Inquisitive*. The age at which one becomes a head of school during his or her career does not seem to be influenced by emotional stability, agreeableness, conscientiousness, or curiosity. Three scales do seem to be in play, however: *Ambition*, *Sociability*, and *Learning Approach*.

The largest difference between people who move into the head of school position earlier in their careers versus later is on the *Learning Approach* scale. *Learning Approach* measures the degree to which a person seems to enjoy academic activities and value educational achievement for its own sake. High scorers tend to be self-disciplined and conscientious about goals and value training for themselves and others. We may draw the conclusion that those candidates who delay seeking out leadership roles early in their careers could be learning as much as possible in each role they hold—such as teaching—before moving up the organizational chart. They also may seek out more degrees and professional development opportunities to broaden their skillset. By contrast, those who seek leadership early in their careers may be more comfortable or adept at learning on the job.

The other two scales that seem to differentiate these groups, *Ambition* and *Sociability*, are two sides of the same personality trait we typically call extroversion. Some people push back against the idea that extroversion and ambition are somehow related, tending to connect extroversion only with the need for social interaction. However, extensive research has shown that extroversion, more than just a measure of sociability or ambition, assesses sensitivity to rewards.*† Highly extroverted people get a higher “high” from making a personal connection or winning a game than people lower on the extroversion scale. As a result, they seek out more interactions and activities that feed their need for positive experiences—for example, by putting themselves in large social gatherings or seeking out projects that position them for promotion.

Extroverted people who are higher on both the *ambition* and *sociability* scales tend to score higher for *leadership emergence*, the degree to which a person stands out from his or her peers through ability to build strategic relationships, exert influence, and be viewed by others as a leader. These people appear to others to be smart, confident, and energetic. They enjoy meeting people, and they are effective at forming the alliances they need to advance their careers. They also tend to be good self-promoters and may therefore be tapped earlier in their careers to move into leadership roles. However, there is scant evidence that leadership emergence correlates with leadership effectiveness, which Hogan defines as the ability to build high-performing organizations, cultivate talent, and lead engaged, productive teams. Promotions based on leadership emergence may not necessarily elevate the most effective leader in a group.

We do not suggest that people who become heads of school early in their careers are less competent than those who rise to the executive level later in their careers. We have no data either way and assessment on leadership effectiveness is beyond the scope of this study. We do believe, however, that schools would benefit from changing the way they identify high-potential leaders on their staff, relying less exclusively on tapping those who appear to have self-evident leadership traits and working hard to uncover the hidden, quieter leaders among them.

* “Cross-Cultural Evidence for the Fundamental Features of Extraversion.” Richard E. Lucas, Ed Diener, Alexander Grob, Eunok M. Suh, and Liang Shao. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79(3), pp. 452-468. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.79.3.452>.

† “Extraversion Predicts Neural Sensitivity to Reward in Large fMRI studies.” C.G. DeYoung, D. R. Hawes, C. Civai, and A. Rustichini. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 60 (Supplement), p. S14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2013.07.361>.