



RESEARCH

ST LEADERSHIP STUDY

HOGAN PERSONALITY INVENTORY (HPI): INTERPERSONAL SENSITIVITY

by Jamie Estes, October 2020

Last week, we discussed the lowest-scoring scale for heads of school in the study, *Sociability*. This week, we examine the highest-scoring scale, **Interpersonal Sensitivity**, which measures the degree to which a person both is and appears to be socially perceptive, sensitive, and tactful. People high in interpersonal sensitivity have the well-developed ability to understand the emotional state of the people around them. They are excellent at reading social cues and others typically perceive them as rewarding teammates.

In 1936, Dale Carnegie published *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, one of the most influential and bestselling books of all time. With advice like “give honest and sincere appreciation,” “become genuinely interested in other people,” and “try honestly to see things from the other person’s point of view,” Carnegie’s book is an ode to the power of high *Interpersonal Sensitivity*. Today, many of Carnegie’s ideas have been repackaged as emotional intelligence. Daniel Goleman made the concept of emotional intelligence part of the common lexicon, breaking it into five components: self-awareness, self-regulation, internal motivation, empathy, and social skills. Emotional intelligence has become so resonant in the culture of leadership research that one popular personality assessment, the EQ-I 2.0, is designed solely to measure it.

Though the lower *Sociability* score of heads in our study may have come as a surprise, few would be stunned to learn that heads of school on average score well on a measure of their ability to understand other people and create enduring relationships. Because the benefits of high **Interpersonal Sensitivity** scores are apparent, we think it is important to take a careful look at the challenges that high **Interpersonal Sensitivity** can present, particularly in the context of leadership.

Robert Sapolsky describes the “dark side” of **Interpersonal Sensitivity** and empathy in his book *Behave*.^{*} Empathy is the ability to understand the emotions and feelings of others—a powerful and innately human trait. But Sapolsky explains the important distinction between empathy and compassion:

“There’s the emotionally distanced sense of sympathy, of feeling for someone. There’s the rawer, vicarious state of feeling their pain as if it were happening to you. And then there is the more cognitively distanced state of perspective taking, of imagining what this must be like for her, not you. As we’ll see, an as-if state carries the danger that you experience her pain so intensely that your primary concern becomes alleviating your own distress.” p. 523.

^{*} Sapolsky, Robert M. *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst*. New York: Penguin, 2017.

There is much to unpack here, but Sapolsky pinpoints the counter-intuitive selfishness that can arise from being highly empathetic. The problem with being extremely empathetic is that it causes the empathic person discomfort. It is in any creature's nature to avoid discomfort. Therefore, the high interpersonal leader may avoid conflict to avoid his own discomfort, as well as the discomfort of others. He may give in to an upset person's request even when it is not in the best interests of the institution. He may withdraw when tensions arise.

Sapolsky goes on to write about the type of person who runs into a burning building to save another person:

“Expose someone to evidence of someone else in pain. If their heart rate increases a lot (a peripheral indicator of anxious, amygdaloid arousal), they are unlikely to act prosocially in the situation. The prosocial ones are those whose heart rates decrease; they can hear the sound of someone else's need instead of the distressed pounding in their own chests.” p. 543.

As leaders, it is vitally important to be able to read people and make meaningful connections with them. However, that ability to connect should never get in the way of doing what is right, even if it is painful. The best leaders we know are experts at finding that balance, using their *Interpersonal Sensitivity* as a strength without allowing it to become a liability.

INTERPERSONAL SENSITIVITY IN PRACTICE

INTERVIEWS WITH HEADS OF SCHOOLS

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

HIGH INTERPERSONAL SENSITIVITY

Were you surprised by your high interpersonal sensitivity score?

I was not surprised by my high interpersonal sensitivity score. It's probably the area I have spent the most time self-evaluating in the last three years. This quality was so valuable to me in the early part of my career as a development officer that I ignored the downsides of that trait. I have sought out advice from mentors on how to address something which is both a strength but also a potential challenge. It's something that seems so good on the surface but can create quiet turmoil within a team.

If you went back and looked at the position description for the Head of School position I now hold, I would be very interested in how it compares to my profile. I followed a head who, I expect, was much lower on interpersonal sensitivity than I am, and I bet the search committee sought me out specifically because I was different from my predecessor.

The average interpersonal sensitivity score among school leaders is well above the global average. Teams with high interpersonal sensitivity scores tend to be good collaborators but can struggle with conflict and "going along to get along." As a leader of a team, how do you ensure relationships are valued yet people are honest and forthright?

This is probably another area for improvement for me. I think I do a good job getting people to speak honestly and openly about what they are feeling. I have to create boundaries that are clear—"I value your opinion but ultimately this is my decision." That's the really tough piece. There are times when two competing sides of an argument have perfectly valid points but still a decision needs to be made.

People who score in the high range for interpersonal sensitivity may find it harder to confront poor performers. How have you dealt with the tension between wanting to maintain relationships and making the tough decision about personnel?

I tend to work really hard to build relationships. When I have to make a decision to remove someone from our community, I try to balance somewhat in that decision what is best for the person as well as the institution. Because I am good at building relationships, I think a strength is identifying early on the challenges that a person may have and then working with them proactively to address those issues.

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

Some of my most rewarding connections have been developed because I very intentionally reached out to build that relationship. I have many colleagues in the independent school world with whom I connected in my mid-career and have relied on their guidance. I value and nurture those relationships. When I hear about some weather event in another town, I reach out to the heads in those areas to make sure they're ok. When



I am heading to a conference, I reach out to folks I hope I will see when I am there. Those relationships have benefitted me personally and professionally.

We noticed in our study that though men average well above the 50th percentile for interpersonal sensitivity (63rd), women are even higher, with an average of 73rd. As a female head, what thoughts do you have about the differences between male and female leadership in relation to interpersonal sensitivity, particularly given the large percentage of female employees in schools?

I am not exactly sure on this. Men and women leaders are different I am sure, but I haven't spent a lot of time thinking about the impact of those differences. I am happy that more women are moving into leadership. I wonder if male leaders do not feel the same pressure to be liked that female heads do.

LOW INTERPERSONAL SENSITIVITY

Were you surprised by your low interpersonal sensitivity score?

I was not surprised by my low score.

The average interpersonal sensitivity score among educators is well above the global average. Have you had to change the way you communicate with people as a result?

There are two things that allow me to operate within my personality framework. When I am one-on-one with people, people believe that I have the ability to be fair and listen to what they are saying. The worst places for me to interact with people are on elevators and at cocktail parties. Unstructured conversations are not easy for me. When the conversation is focused, I can really dig in. I listen carefully and connect deeply.

When I first meet people, they think I am aloof or standoffish. They overcome that perception as they get to know me.

The other thing that has helped me in my career is that I am very skilled at public speaking. I have no reservation about speaking in front of groups. I was a speech and debate kid. I am well-trained and very comfortable in that setting. I can create a sense of intimacy in a big group that people may not typically perceive in a larger setting.

I am also a highly effective writer and can connect with people that way, which does not depend on my interpersonal sensitivity at all but more on my intelligence and skill as a communicator. I am quite intentional about making connections through writing.

There is a common refrain at the beginning of my conversations with people. They say, "I am sorry to interrupt. I know you're busy." Meetings that start that way tend to be efficient. As head of a large school, it's important to be present, but it's not required to know personal details of everybody I meet. It would be harder for me in a smaller environment where the expectations around my time and personal connection were different.

People who score in the low range for interpersonal sensitivity tend to have less trouble or hesitation confronting poor performers. Has this been a pattern in your career?

I do not believe I have less trouble or hesitation confronting poor performers. It's never easy. When I first started at my current school, I was very deliberate and took my time to figure out what moves I needed to make regarding staff. That said, my leadership team would probably say I confront poor performers quickly and effectively. I know I have that reputation.

I used to think that my more distant demeanor would allow me not to take the emotional stuff home. I no longer feel that way. I do take more home than I would like, but it's just the nature of the job.

How do you think your level of interpersonal sensitivity has impacted your career?

When you come into a new school, you get some passes on how well you know people. The longer you stay in a community, the fewer passes you get. The expectation over time is that I get to know people more deeply. Now that I have been at my school for a few years, this side of me is becoming more noticeable. Earlier in my career I worked in international schools and the faculty turned over quickly, which made it easier on me. At this school, the faculty is very stable, so I have to work harder to nurture relationships over time.

We talk a lot about the fit being right when we add people to our staff. A person and a place have to line up. I am sure there are many places where I would not be successful. I feel quite fortunate to be in a place where, so far, my personality has been a good fit.

We noticed in our study that though men average well above the 50th percentile for interpersonal sensitivity (63), women are even higher, with an average of 73. As a male head of school, what thoughts do you have about the differences between male and female leadership in relation to interpersonal sensitivity, particularly given the large percentage of female employees in schools?

It does not surprise me at all that women leaders are higher on interpersonal sensitivity. I think that female heads are likely promoted because of their ability to connect with people more than male heads are. I have only one senior administrator who is male. I think a lot about the make-up of the team. I have some people on my team who are like me and some people who are not, which I think makes them a better team. It's important to have that balance. What is most important to me is to have a team with minimal drama and I try to hire low-drama people.



SPECIAL TOPIC

GENDER

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 where the comparison groups become unequal in size, the data could be more unreliable. However, we feel like these pieces are worth sharing and we hope to continue our research, both quantitatively and qualitatively, to better understand some of these key issues.

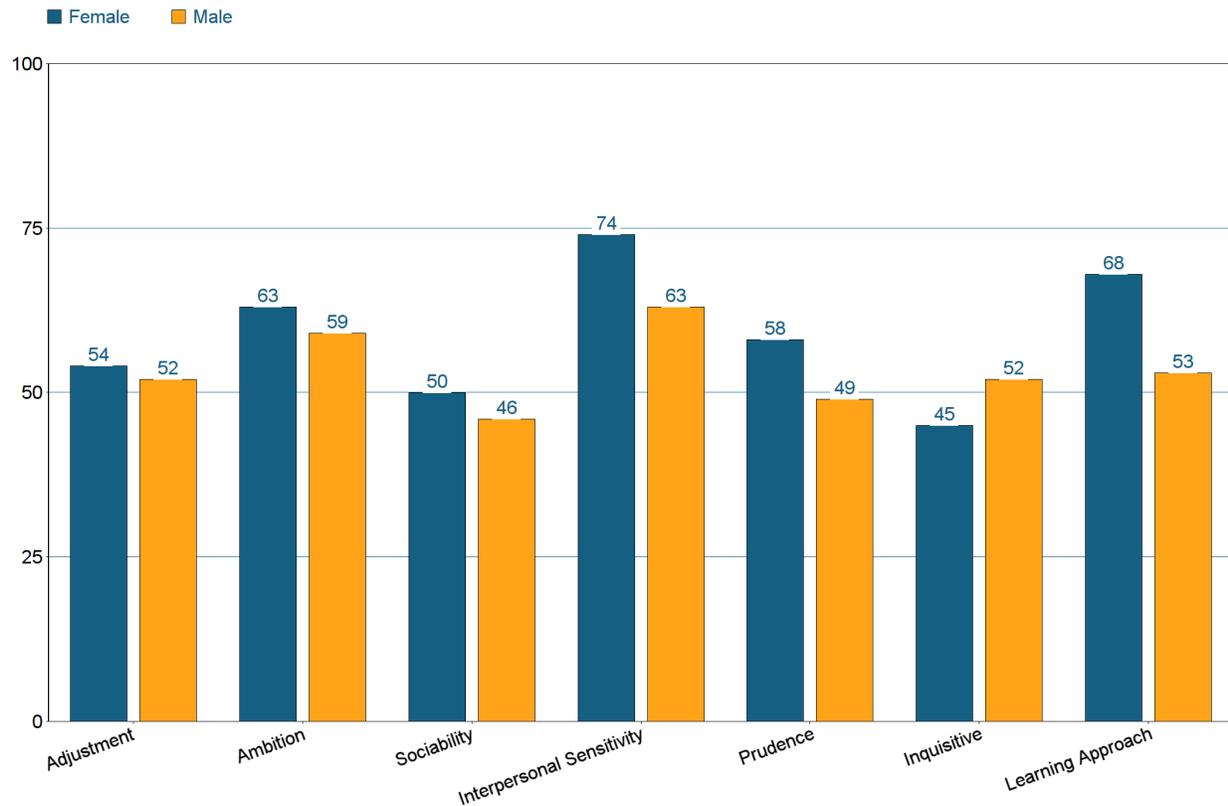
This week, we explore the personality differences between heads of school based on gender.

Participants broke down demographically in the following manner, where N equals the number of participants.

In this case, 24% of participants in the study were women and 76% were men. Southern Association of Independent School statistics indicate that approximately 20% of member schools have female heads, so our sample is roughly representative of southern schools in general.

FEMALE (N=57) MALE (N=190)

HPI Comparisons: Gender



CONCLUSIONS

Male and female heads score similarly on measures of *Adjustment*, *Ambition*, and *Sociability*, suggesting male and female heads are similar in their emotional stability, drive to succeed, and desire to be around others. Male heads score a bit higher on the *Inquisitive* scale and much lower on *Learning Approach*, two components of openness to experience. We will discuss these two scales more in the next two weeks, but this pattern generally suggests that female heads are more likely to be up to date on the latest research than male heads, but have less interest in innovations that lack clear, practical implications. Women leaders also scored higher on *Prudence*, suggesting that they are more detail-oriented than their male counterparts. These three scales together (*Prudence*, *Inquisitive*, and *Learning Approach*) speak to the differences between male and female heads' problem-solving style. Taken together, the differences we see suggest women heads are more likely to adhere to rules and less likely to challenge established procedures than male heads of school.

It is one of the central theses of this study that leadership style is largely influenced by the personality of the leader. Barbara Ostos, the Assistant Head at Catlin Gabel School in Portland, OR, did an interesting study for her dissertation on male and female leadership in independent schools.^{*} She concluded that independent school leadership aligns with female leaders' natural way of leading. She wrote:

Women, in general, tend to be more transformational than transactional in leadership studies. However, studies of independent school leadership show less of a difference in leadership style between men and women, with leadership in general tending towards transformational (Ostos, 72).

Transactional leaders are results-driven, believe in strict boundaries, evaluate performance often and carefully, and focus on efficiency and effectiveness. In environments with constrained resources and time-sensitive objectives (which describes many independent schools), transactional leadership can be highly effective. Transformational leaders, on the other hand, focus more on vision and values, lead by example, and strive to inspire their teams by building enthusiasm.

Roughly, transactional leaders use carrot-and-stick motivational tactics to deal with present concerns within clear boundaries, whereas transformational leaders inspire staff by building strong relationships and work toward a shared vision by going beyond the confines of their jobs.

Some studies on leadership have suggested that women tend to adopt transformational leadership styles because social pressures and constraints force them to do so. To quote Northwestern psychologist Alice Eagly, "Women generally avoid more domineering, 'command and control' behavior because of the backlash they receive if they lead in this way. Men can often get away with autocratic behavior that is roundly disliked in women."[†] In other words, a transactional woman leader is unlikely to advance. As we will explore in more detail in a future article, the failure of women to advance likely occurs early on in their careers. The societal preference for women whose leadership style is more collaborative may explain in part why women leaders in our study score in the 74th percentile for Interpersonal Sensitivity compared to men who score in the 63rd.

Interestingly, Interpersonal Sensitivity was the lowest scale for corporate leadership and the highest for the independent school leaders in our study. Male or female, being a highly relational, transformational-style leader seems almost a prerequisite for rising to the role of Head of School.

^{*}Ostos, B. (2012). Tapping on the glass : the intersection of leadership and gender in independent school administration. UC San Diego. ProQuest ID: Ostos_ucsd_0033D_12330. Merritt ID: ark:/20775/bb0308449h. Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/64v5k0rg>
[†] Eagly, Alice H. "Why 'Lean In'? Hybrid Style Succeeds, and Women Are Best at It." *The New York Times*, March 20, 2013.