# ST LEADERSHIP STUDY

HOGAN PERSONALITY INVENTORY (HPI): PRUDENCE

by Jamie Estes, October 2020

Prudence measures a person's dependability, attention to detail, and conformity to standards. High scorers are perceived as orderly, organized, reliable, and responsible. They hold high standards for their own performance and the performance of others. They tend to be good organizational citizens who are attentive to rules and procedures. They make informed decisions. When considering adding a member to a team, these traits are often near the top of any job description, and for good reason. Research shows that prudence and conscientiousness, as well as interpersonal sensitivity and agreeableness, are most closely aligned with professional success "across many jobs, spanning across low to high levels of job complexity, training, and experience."[*]

A few years ago, we had the opportunity to give the Hogan Assessments to one of the graduate school cohorts at Vanderbilt University's Independent School Leadership program. Testing a hypothesis, we kept track of the order in which each member of the cohort completed the assessment and compared that to their *Prudence* score. Below are the results:

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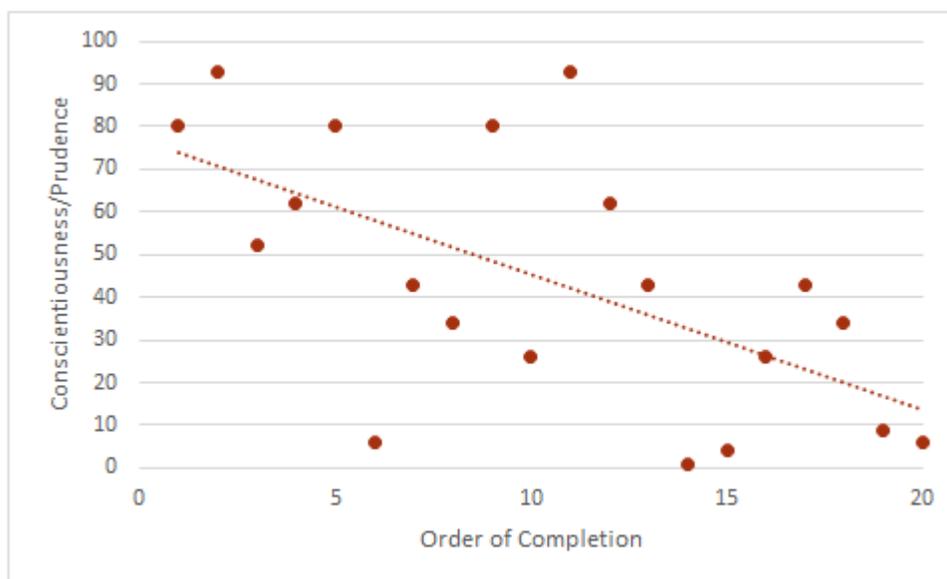
*Sackett, P. R. and P. T. Walmsley. Which Personality Attributes Are Most Important in the Workplace?. *Perspect Psychol Sci.* 2014;9(5):538-551. doi:10.1177/1745691614543972.

Though *Prudence* was clearly not the sole predictor for how quickly the participants completed this optional and ungraded task, the trend line shows a clear correlation. We can measure the correlation in the form of an R score. A perfect correlation in which the highest Prudence scorer completed the assessment first, the second highest scorer completed it second, and so on, would have an R score of 1. If there was no correlation at all, we would calculate an R score of 0. In this case, the R score for this group correlating their Prudence scores and how quickly they completed the assessment is .62, which is remarkably high considering we are measuring seemingly random human behavior.

Prudent people are internally driven to get things done. This generally positive trait, however, can have drawbacks. Alice Boyes, a clinical psychologist who writes about anxiety and self-care, writes, "Productivity isn't about getting *more* done. It's about *what* you get done."[†] People very high on the *Prudence* scale can struggle to prioritize tasks. Many people are familiar with the Eisenhower Matrix in which one sorts tasks into quadrants based on importance and urgency. Very prudent people struggle to put tasks in any category other than high importance/high urgency. Their need to get everything done and done well can stand in the way of their ability to be productive.

As a member of a team under close supervision, high-*Prudence* people can be invaluable. The supervisor of a prudent team member can provide clarity on which tasks are most important and then trust that those tasks will be completed at a high level. As one moves up the organizational chart, however, that external locus of control weakens and diffuses. One of the most important qualities in a leader is the ability to set priorities about what needs to get done and in what order, an ability that high *Prudence* people may lack.

It is not surprising, then, that the average for *Prudence* among heads in our leadership study was 51, suggesting that high *Prudence* is not a requirement for moving into leadership. Low-*Prudence* leaders are much more prepared than their high-*Prudence* colleagues to handle the ambiguous problems and shades of gray required in executive decision-making. Of course, leaders who are very low on the *Prudence* scale have their own challenges. They may struggle to plan ahead and may start new tasks before old tasks are complete. They may become bored by repetitive tasks. Perhaps more than with any other scale, effective leaders should balance their *Prudence* profile with team members showing different *Prudence* scores. They need people who see the forest if all they can see is the trees, and the trees if all they can see is the forest.

[†]Boyes, Alice. "Don't Let Perfection Be the Enemy of Productivity." *Harvard Business Review* March 03, 2020. https://hbr.org/2020/03/dont-let-perfection-be-the-enemy-of-productivity.

PRUDENCE IN PRACTICE
INTERVIEWS WITH HEADS OF SCHOOLS

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

HIGH PRUDENCE

Were you surprised by your high *Prudence* score?

I was not surprised by my *Prudence* score. It describes me to a "t."

People with high *Prudence* are often described as "good organizational citizens." They tend to move up through the ranks because they are dependable and hard working. When they move into leadership, however, sometimes a high *Prudence* person's tendency to see the world as black-and-white can be an issue. You clearly have been a successful leader—what did you have to learn about yourself, particularly in relation to *Prudence*, to find success?

I consider myself to be a team player. I like things to be organized, but I try not to be controlling. For example, in my fourth year as Head of School I read a lot about global education. I called a meeting inviting anybody who was interested in global education to come to the boardroom. That was the only preamble—I did not send out an agenda. Twenty-seven people showed up. I had in my mind a vision, but I wanted others to help flesh it out. Twelve years later, we have 116 students coming to our campus from all over the world. I consider myself an idea person first, but particular about how the plan unfolds. I am ok with not knowing what the final plan will look like; I am not ok with never getting to the final plan. I am not ok with open-ended plans that are not driven to conclusion.

High *Prudence* scorers tend to make decisions only after quite a bit of research and information gathering. Is that true of you? If so, how does it impact your leadership style, particularly when dealing with people who may want quicker or more instinctual decisions?

I believe in doing quick research. I am a "now" person. I will get help from others to shorten the process. I do not sit on things for long. However, the research is important.

High *Prudence* scorers are sometimes accused of not being "big-picture." What do you do to make sure that you see "the forest and the trees"?

I believe I do see the big picture. I use the phrase, "Let's pull back the lens" all the time. I like to pause and look at the impact of different paths. This is something I have had to learn from experience. Because I am a "now" person, I sometimes have to think about the impact of my decisions. I sometimes feel constrained by other people, but those constraints are a good thing because they remind me of the big picture.

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

I have always been hardworking. The advice that I give aspiring heads all the time is that your work ethic will get you noticed first. When I look back at being a division head and associate head at the school I now serve as Head, I note that I was always willing to volunteer to do more. I believe an important element to my success

has been my interest in asking questions and getting involved.

I am a relentless worker. As I begin to think about my retirement, it's hard for me to identify myself not as part of the school. My work and my school are so much a part of who I am.

Another piece of advice I give is to hire people different than you are. That said, I am also pretty conservative. I have high standards for decorum. People know that they have to behave a certain way around me.

I see how my personality affects my personal life as well. Whenever we went on a family trip when my kids were younger, I would have the entire trip planned out for each stop and an expectation for exactly how long each event would take. I tell people I don't really know how to have fun.

One of the most interesting things we noticed were the differences between heads of schools who had completed their doctorates and those who had not. Most surprisingly, there was no difference in terms of *Inquisitiveness* (intellectual curiosity) or *Learning Approach* (value of traditional learning methods) between the two groups. However, those who had completed their doctorates scored significantly higher for *adjustment* (emotional stability), *ambition*, *sociability*, *interpersonal sensitivity*, and *prudence*. Any thoughts on what drove you complete your doctorate and what qualities made it possible for you to complete it?

I consider myself a generalist. I love to touch upon a lot of different things.

I believe that my ambition score drove me to get my doctorate. Growing up, I was never the smartest person in my class, but I tended to get the best grades. Everything that I do takes hard work to achieve. I am goal-oriented. I wanted to get my doctorate from the best school so I could challenge myself. I waited to get my doctorate until my kids were grown. I did it because I felt it was my time. I felt like I had a good team in place who could run the school when I was gone. I was at a point in my educational career where I felt like I could use a "burst" of new knowledge. I also was in a position to afford it financially. Getting my doctorate was the hardest thing I have ever done professionally and the best thing I have done professionally. I could not have done it if I was not organized.

LOW PRUDENCE

Were you surprised by your low *Prudence* score?

I was not surprised in the least by my score. I feel like schools often suffer from paralysis by analysis and move forward at a glacial pace. Schools are client-service organizations, and their clients are fickle consumers. Schools must be agile in the marketplace if they want to succeed. I see obstacles simply as things to overcome. I have never faced a problem that I believed was intractable. Every problem has a solution.

Low *Prudence* scorers tend to be comfortable with ambiguity and lack of structure. Is that true of you? If so, how does it impact your leadership style, particularly when dealing with people who may want more structure and direction?

I definitely surround myself with people who are the opposite of me. I would not say that I lack structure. I am comfortable with the fluidity of change, but I keep in mind the end game. I am also not unaware of the tactics of any situation. I can get down in the weeds; I just don't want to stay there very long.

My assistant once told me, "If you want me to manage your calendar, let me manage your calendar." She was tired of my telling people I was available without checking with her first, and I was ending up double-booked a lot. I was willing to go along with her request because it was the right thing. I have learned to become a bit more disciplined.

Low *Prudence* scorers also tend to be flexible about rules and open to change. As someone who has to enforce the rules with students and parents, has this been a challenge?

I would not say I am a rule-breaker. I do not just make up stuff as I go along. I do want processes that help things move forward and are not just processes for processes sake. I believe I am most comfortable managing the big picture. I like to hire people who have high emotional intelligence. I want people who know who they are.

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

The other thing that I thought about was my adjustment score. I am lower on that scale, which means that I am pretty self-critical. That self-critical side of me does drive me to make sure that details are taken care of. I feel the pressure of the job. My decisions affect a lot of people.

One of the most interesting things we noticed were the differences between heads of schools who had completed their doctorates and those who had not. Most surprisingly, there was no difference in terms of *Inquisitiveness* (intellectual curiosity) or *Learning Approach* (value of traditional learning methods) between the two groups. However, those who had completed their doctorates scored significantly higher for *adjustment* (emotional stability), *ambition*, *sociability*, *interpersonal sensitivity*, and *prudence*. You are very well credentialed, but never went for your doctorate. Talk about your thinking regarding education.

I never really considered getting a doctorate. However, I did take some business classes early in my tenure as head of school because I learned I needed that training. I have always been pretty practical about professional development.
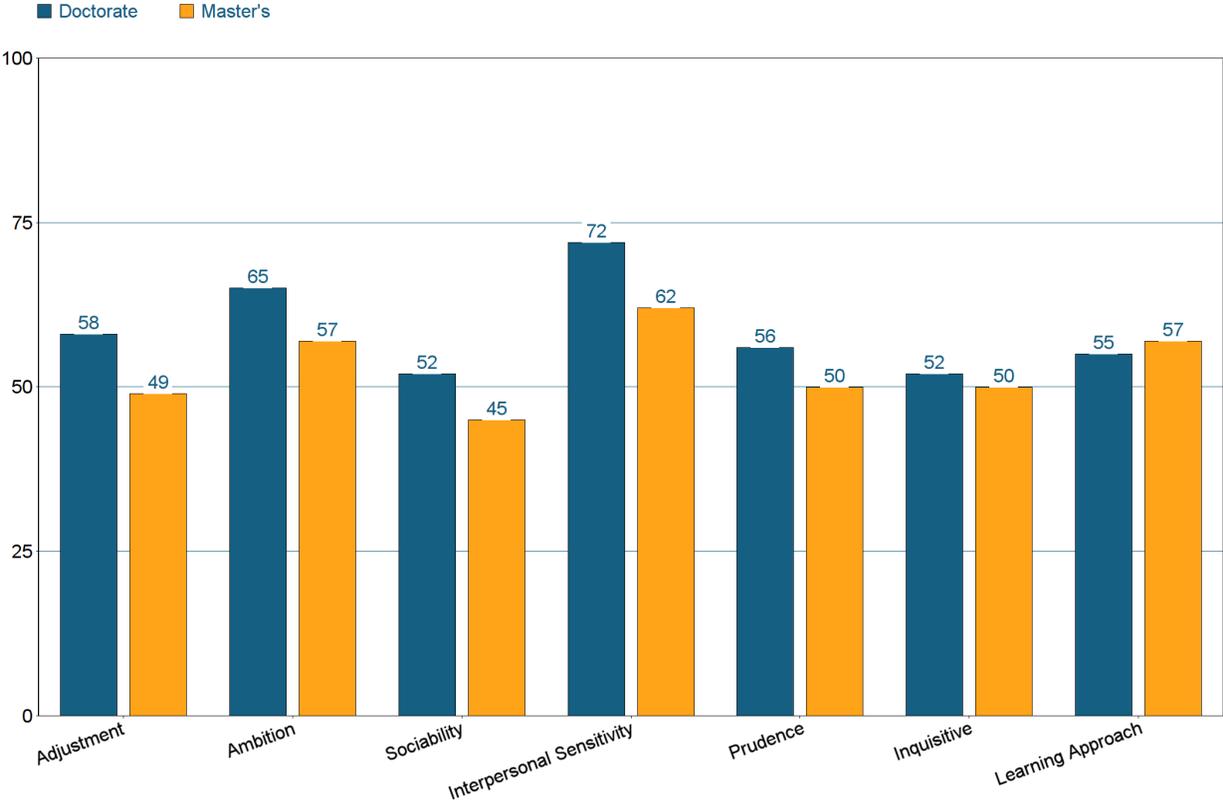
SPECIAL TOPIC
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

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 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 educational attainment.

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

DOCTORATE (N=60)   MASTER'S (N=172)

HPI Comparisons: Educational Attainment

Legend: ■ Doctorate ■ Master's

Dimension	Doctorate	Master's
Adjustment	58	49
Ambition	65	57
Sociability	52	45
Interpersonal Sensitivity	72	62
Prudence	56	50
Inquisitive	52	50
Learning Approach	55	57

CONCLUSIONS

When looking at heads sorted by educational attainment, their differences in personality are perhaps less interesting than their similarities. On only two scales are these two groups basically the same: *Inquisitive* and *Learning Approach*. As we will investigate in the next two weeks, the *Inquisitive* and *Learning Approach* scales both relate to a person's openness to experience. *Inquisitive* speaks to one's natural curiosity about new things, and *Learning Approach* measures one on a continuum between a preference for the purely academic pursuit of knowledge and a practical approach to gaining skills through hands-on learning. According to the limited data we have in this study, neither scale impacts an educator's desire to pursue higher education. It was certainly a surprise to us that neither curiosity nor an appreciation for educational pursuits had much influence on the heads' desire to continue their education.

The psychology of those heads who do pursue a doctorate at some point in their careers does appear to correlate with higher scores on the other five scales. Heads who have obtained their doctorates score higher for *adjustment*, perhaps because they are better able to handle the pressure of pursuing a degree while likely (but not necessarily) working in a school. Similarly, they score a bit higher on *prudence*, suggesting they are better able to juggle multiple responsibilities and stay organized enough to see their course of study through to the end. They score higher on *ambition*, suggesting they may be motivated to earn their terminal degree partly because they feel it will get them ahead of their peers. They also score higher for both *sociability* and *interpersonal sensitivity*, suggesting that there may be a social draw to joining a cohort of learners with similar interests and aspirations.

The decision to pursue a doctorate is likely influenced as much by one's personal situation as one's personality (though we would argue that those factors are themselves connected). A person's professional, financial, and family situation all have a large impact on the decision to invest time and money in a doctoral degree. However, personality likely plays a role in a person's decision to pursue a degree and her/his ability to complete it.