ST LEADERSHIP STUDY

HOGAN PERSONALITY INVENTORY (HPI): INQUISITIVE

by Jamie Estes, October 2020

The **Inquisitive** attribute measures the degree to which a person is perceived as intellectually curious and open to new ideas. It entails such descriptors as imaginative, visionary, and easily bored and is labeled "openness to experience" in other personality models. People high on the inquisitiveness scale tend to be less dogmatic, holding their beliefs less strongly. They enjoy seeing and thinking about the world in new ways.

People high on the *Inquisitive* scale can generate lots of ideas and prove to be resourceful problem-solvers. They are more adventurous and big picture-oriented.   They think "outside-the-box." They thrive on new challenges and projects and get bored without them. As we will explore in more detail later in this article, high inquisitive is a trait we see in heads who move around more often in their careers. High inquisitive scorers can have unreliable "practicality filters," believing that all their ideas are equally valuable. They may downplay process and prefer ideation to execution. Others may perceive them as unpredictable or impractical.

Studies in recent years indicate that highly inquisitive people are perceived to be more intelligent and there is research to support the basis for this perception. However, the research shows that the inquisitive/open-to-experience trait correlates much more strongly with "verbal/crystallized intelligence" than with "spatial/fluid intelligence."[*] Briefly defined, fluid intelligence is the ability to use logic to solve problems in new or novel situations without reference to pre-existing knowledge. Crystallized intelligence, on the other hand, involves the ability to solve problems by applying previously acquired knowledge or experience. The research suggests, then, that there is little connection between being highly inquisitive and being able to solve problems in new and creative ways. However, because high inquisitive people prefer novelty, ask questions, and enjoy learning new things, they tend to accrue a broader range of intellectual skills and knowledge over time, even if they are not necessarily higher on executive functioning or divergent thinking than their low inquisitive peers. High inquisitive leaders are not resourceful problem solvers because of an in-born talent for figuring out solutions to novel problems, but because of their eclectic well of resources they can call upon to make sense of the new and unknown.

In our study of heads of school, *Inquisitive* was the second lowest scale with an average score of 50, right at the global norm. The independent school world presents a mosaic of educational philosophies, cultures, and styles, from highly progressive schools that foster creativity and imagination to schools that value process and mastery through repetition. The heads of these schools demonstrate the same variety. When selecting new leaders, schools should be particularly aware of the *Inquisitive* scale. Schools that value tradition and "the ways things have always been done here" would be a poor fit for a highly inquisitive head. New schools or schools facing drastically different new challenges may benefit from having a highly inquisitive head to help them chart a new path.

*Schretlen, David J., Egberdina J. van der Julst, Godfrey D. Pearlson, and Barry Gordon. "A Neuropsychological Study of Personality: Trait Openness in Relation to Intelligence, Fluency, and Executive Functioning." *J Clin Exp Neuropsychol.* 2010 Dec; 32(10): 1068–1073. doi: 10.1080/13803391003689770.

THE INQUISITIVE SCALE IN PRACTICE

INTERVIEWS WITH HEADS OF SCHOOLS

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

HIGH INQUISITIVE

Were you surprised by your high *Inquisitive* score?

This is really interesting. I believe I have had to learn how to be different than my natural tendencies. When I take personality assessments, I am torn about responding towards my natural inclinations or what I have learned in a career in leadership. I would like to believe that much of my time as head of school was spent serving in the role that was not present among the other leaders on staff. So, if my leadership team was full of big picture thinkers, then I would be the one to focus on the details. If they were super conscientious, then I might play my more natural role of being the questioner, the big picture guy. I trained people to be very didactic with me. When people got excited, I often would be the calm person.

***Prudence*, *Inquisitive*, and *Learning Approach* combine to describe someone's problem-solving approach. How would you describe your problem-solving approach?**

I would say that I am a creative problem solver. For the first two-thirds of my career, I benefited from economic tailwinds. When the crash happened in 2008, I got excited. I saw it as a wonderful challenge to be innovative. Because we were forced to do things in new ways rather than the ways that had always worked before, I felt unshackled. My board members from 2009 to 2015 would describe me as innovative and the person whose vision saved the school. My board members from 2015 to 2020 would have a different opinion. I didn't change, but I struggled to communicate what I was trying to do with the board.

How do you balance intuition and data analysis when approaching problems?

What comes to me immediately are the decisions that impacted students. The data in those cases can often point one direction while my intuition would inform how I communicated the decision. It's about balancing our obligations to the community and to the individual. My tendency might be to allow my intuition to get in the way and it could cause ethical dilemmas.

Has your problem-solving style affected your leadership hiring?

I always wanted to make sure my leadership staff asked all the questions they needed to ask. Obviously, I hired for the big things—diversity, skillsets, and culture. However, those large goals could be competing. You want someone who is great with both kids and adults, and that's not always possible. My data-driven approach would be to make sure we asked a lot of questions before narrowing the pool. I was willing to think outside the box on hiring.

I tried to hire people who were more like me than less like me. I benefited from having three people I inherited at my last school who occupied that high prudence, high practical side.

In my last three or four years, I started to shift towards growing my leaders more than directing them. That was probably one of the reasons my communication with the board broke down. I was doing a lot more

coaching than I had done before in part because of the confidence I had in my team.

We noticed in our study that heads of schools with higher *Inquisitive* and higher *Ambition* scores tended to have more headships in their career (you are in the high range for both). You served as head at four schools over your career. Do you think that your ambition and inquisitiveness were factors in shaping your career?

I know exactly why I moved each time. The first time, I was a teacher, and I got my master's and figured that's all I needed to be a good head of school. In January, I told my boss I was going to be a head of school and I secured a headship in April. All my boss said was, "Good luck." I was a head of that first school for eight years.

I was doing some consulting for another school that ended up offering me their headship. I said I would only do it if they fired the entire administrative staff. I felt like I had taken my first school as far as it would go, and I was excited about the prospect of a fresh start. I got my second school headed in the right direction. I started to think I would be interested in leading a faith-based school and put my feelers out. I landed at a parish school. My last school was much bigger than my previous schools, though they were not going to pay me any more money. In this last case, I was excited about the challenge of a bigger, more complex school.

I have always felt I could do anything I set my heart to. I learned later in life that was false, but that feeling drove me for a long time. It's why I got jobs that I was really unqualified for.

A big lesson I learned over time was that I needed to change for the institution, the institution did not need to change for me. And if I was unable to change for the school, then it was time to move on.

LOW INQUISITIVE

Were you surprised by your low *inquisitive* score?

I was not at all surprised. After 18 years as Head of School, that's probably the one area I still have to work on. I would not say that I lack vision, but I am somewhat cautious by nature. I lead a 140-year-old school—it's a place that rewards structure and tradition, which may be part of the reason we have been a good match.

How do you think your inquisitive level has impacted your career?

I have to be careful to avoid stagnation. I have to be intentional about being imaginative because it's not my natural mode. I am surrounded by a long-tenured administrative team. We have a preference for not fixing things that are not broken, perhaps to our detriment at times.

I try to stay pretty-up-to date, but I often say when reading about new trends, "That's not going to work here." I may say that too often.

Prudence, *Inquisitive*, and *Learning Approach* combine to describe someone's problem solving approach. How would you describe your problem-solving approach?

I would describe myself as a pretty instinctual leader. I am collaborative, though. I like to talk to the new people who join our staff and ask for their input on what they observe. I appreciate fresh perspectives.

How do you balance intuition and data analysis when approaching problems?

I lean towards intuition when approaching problems. We had a sticky personnel issue that an administrator was working on. I gave him some advice and the administrator came back and said, "You were exactly right." I might chalk that up to experience and learning from my own mistakes.

Has your problem-solving style affected your leadership hiring?

I hire first for a love of school and a love for kids. Next, I look for people who understand the nuance of working with other people. We are a boarding school and working and living with other people successfully is vital. Last, I look for people who have a different perspective. I am cautious about hiring people who are idealistic about people and assume that everybody will get along. I look for people who know that getting along takes work, particularly with high school kids away from home. I need people who don't mind the sweat and tears. I probably do hire people who think like I do, though I think I am growing in that area.

We noticed in our study that heads of schools with lower *Inquisitive* scores tended to have fewer headships in their career. You have been at your school over two decades. Do you believe there is any connection between your personality and your longevity?

I would like to think that my low inquisitive score speaks to the stability of my career. I believe I have stayed here because of a supportive board. I would say that I have stayed at this school a long time in part because I know how it works. My biggest concern about my long tenure is the shelf life of my influence.
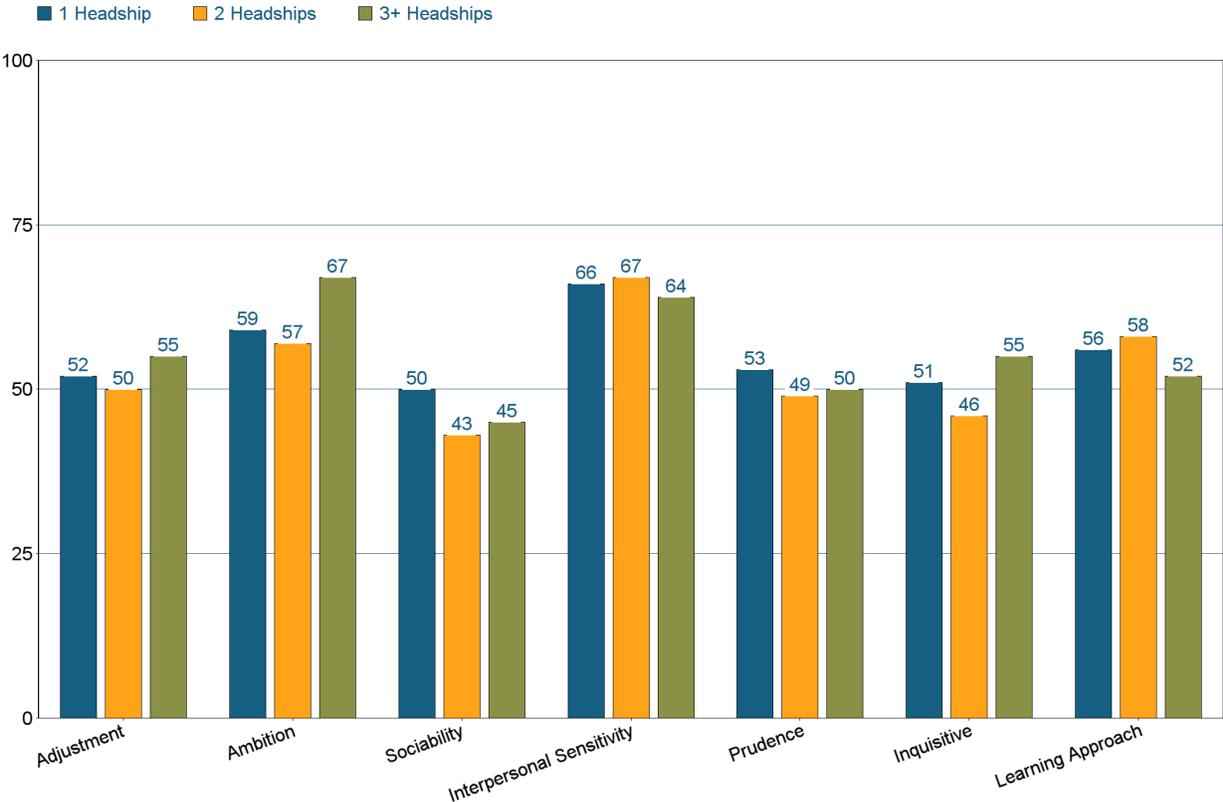
SPECIAL TOPIC
NUMBER OF HEADSHIPS

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.

When we are discussing our search services with boards, one of the questions we often get concerns the average tenure of the heads we place. We understand the question. Head of School transitions are expensive and cause stress in a school community. Tenure is one of the most easily measured markers of a head's success. In our study, we were curious about any connections between personality and how often a head of school candidate moves.

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

One Headship (N=138)   Two Headships (N=67)   Three or more Headships (N=42)

HPI Comparisons: Number of Headships

Legend: ■ 1 Headship ■ 2 Headships ■ 3+ Headships

Category	1 Headship	2 Headships	3+ Headships
Adjustment	52	50	55
Ambition	59	57	67
Sociability	50	43	45
Interpersonal Sensitivity	66	67	64
Prudence	53	49	50
Inquisitive	51	46	55
Learning Approach	56	58	52

CONCLUSIONS

The biggest difference between heads who have held only one executive position and those how have held many is *Ambition*. Ambitious people tend to move more. The second biggest difference is their inquisitive nature.

In our experience, search committees tend to be drawn to candidates who are more ambitious and more inquisitive. They like the drive and achievement orientation of highly ambitious candidates. They like the intellectual curiosity and vision of highly inquisitive people. However, these attractive qualities are often what lead successful heads to depart for new opportunities—for a larger student body and a bigger budget to manage. Ambitious candidates are more likely to see each career opportunity as a stepping-stone. They may become bored or frustrated if a school's cultural dynamics do not allow for rapid change. When we ask our candidates why they are considering a move from their current position, the response of the high *Inquisitive* person is, "I have done all I can do here."

Early in the head search process, we work hard to understand the institution's openness to change. This is a complicated question, and it is important that the board and the search committee see the distinction between the board's desire for change and the institution's capacity for change. Often, a school that has been resistant to change in the past may appoint new board members who want to "shake things up." This board may push to hire a head who is clearly an "agent for change." As the new head starts acting out the board's mandate, the school community may resist. And perhaps neither the board nor the head can deal effectively with the resulting pushback from school constituents. The board membership changes over again, a more traditional group assumes leadership and decides that it's time again for a new head of school who will bring stability and "leave well enough alone." The resulting disruption can damage the school's reputation and erode confidence in the school's leadership.

When a school's culture is ambitious and desires change, it may hire a dynamic, ambitious head of school. To retain the ambitious, inquisitive head, the board should engage in regular review of strategic plans and set new goals. Ambitious heads are energized by accomplishment, so laying out new carrots of achievement keeps the ambitious head engaged. A culture of improvement can be its own institutional bedrock, given a thoughtful approach and careful monitoring.