ST LEADERSHIP STUDY

HOGAN PERSONALITY INVENTORY (HPI): LEARNING APPROACH

by Jamie Estes, November 2020

The last scale we examine is **Learning Approach**—essentially, the degree to which a person values intellectual attainment for its own sake and enjoys formal education to stay up to date on business and technical issues.

On the surface, it would seem that all educators should score highly on the *Learning Approach* scale. They have chosen a career in which academic activities fill their lives, and they encourage students to value educational achievement and to pursue higher education. The heads in our sample did score above the global norm for *Learning Approach*, in the 56th percentile overall. However, it is only their third highest scale, behind *Interpersonal Sensitivity* (65th) and *Ambition* (59th). Corporate CEOs' average *Learning Approach* score is above 60.

We noted in week two that younger heads on average scored higher on the *Inquisitive* scale and lower on *Learning Approach* than their more senior peers. We suggested that younger heads are therefore more likely to create schools that stimulate curiosity and emphasize hands-on learning. In recent years, the heads that schools choose to lead them reflect and shape the way students learn in their schools.

People high on *Learning Approach* strive to remain up to date on trends and best practices in their profession. They value continuing education and professional development, and they make decisions that are well informed and based on current research and data. In general, they focus more on learning than doing, and they can come across as dogmatic or pedantic. The cultural literacy and standards-based movements of the late 1980's were likely driven by high *Learning Approach* educators.

People lower on *Learning Approach* look to hands-on, nontraditional venues for training and learning. They are more likely to value a mentor or an apprenticeship, and they prefer to apply skills rather than learn new methodologies. As leaders, they tend to be less insistent upon professional development and accountability towards skill development, believing that people will learn what they need to know when they need to know it.

Most leaders will show a mix of these traits. They will be open to new ideas in some areas and dogmatic in others. Similarly, the schools they lead will have areas where knowledge acquisition is paramount, and others where skill building is the focus. Of all the personality traits we have covered over the last seven weeks, we see *Learning Approach* as having the smallest, though not insignificant, impact on head effectiveness and head/ school fit.

However, the data did show one interesting wrinkle worth exploring. Female heads scored significantly higher on learning approach (67th percentile) than the male heads did (52nd percentile). Study participants who became school heads after age 50 also scored significantly higher (70th percentile) than those who became school heads

in their 30s (54th percentile) or 40s (51st percentile). We were not surprised to see a connection between female heads and "older new" heads. In our study, approximately 10% of the men became heads of schools after age 50, while 35% of the women became heads after age 50.

The research for why more women do not become corporate leaders is extensive. One compelling idea comes from a recent LeanIn/McKinsey study called the Broken Rung Theory.[*] The study states

> "The biggest obstacle women face on the path to senior leadership is at the first step up to manager. For every 100 men promoted and hired to manager, only 72 women are promoted and hired. This broken rung results in more women getting stuck at the entry level and fewer women becoming managers. Not surprisingly, men end up holding 62 percent of manager-level positions, while women hold just 38 percent." p.8.

That difficult first step into leadership has a long-term impact. In our work, our challenge is never getting search committees to consider female candidates. The challenge is having enough women candidates in the pool. The challenge comes well before the search for executive level positions.

Earlier in the study, we offered a possible explanation for the link between high *Learning Approach* and later-in-career first headships. Candidates who delay seeking out leadership roles early in their careers may be spending that time training for the job, pursuing advanced degrees in their fields, and broadening their skill sets. Those who seek leadership early in their careers seem more comfortable learning on the job. On the other hand, perhaps the study indicates that women leaders who score higher on *Learning Approach*, who continue to seek out opportunities for professional development and attend conferences, are the ones who manage to get over the broken rung and position themselves for leadership, though it takes a bit longer to get there. All of us involved in promoting people into school leadership must see the need to get women into the talent pipelines as soon as possible. It's the vital first step in fixing the career ladder for women leaders.

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[*] Thomas, Rachel et al. *Women in the Workplace: 2019.* LeanIn.org; McKinsey & Company. https://wiw-report.s3.amazonaws.com/Women_in_the_Workplace_2019_print.pdf

LEARNING APPROACH IN PRACTICE

INTERVIEWS WITH HEADS OF SCHOOLS

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

HIGH LEARNING APPROACH

Were you surprised by your high *Learning Approach* score?

I get a kick out of learning and staying up to date. I would not, however, ever describe myself as an academic. I do not consider myself the least bit professorial. I just came out of a two-day training with the educational advisory board, and I get so excited to come back and share what I learned and to try things out.

When you are hiring other people for your leadership team, do you find yourself drawn to other people who are similarly "academic," or do you look for people think a bit differently?

I look for people who are experts on what I need them to run. I have never been afraid to hire people who are far better skilled and far smarter than I am. The strength of the team depends on the expertise on it. I try to hire people who complement me. I have not really thought about learning style. I do like people who are innovative and get excited about the next thing. I never want to rest on my laurels, and I want people who feel the same way.

The people on my administrative team are all people who enjoy reading and keeping up to date.

Has your desire to learn more skills and read more about education ever caused a challenge for you in terms of your leadership?

When I started at my school, we had Wednesdays where students went off campus. I thought that it gave us additional full days of professional development to give faculty, but I got a whole lot of pushback against that. So, I had to pull back a bit. When we changed the Wednesday schedule, I kept blocks free for teachers for professional development, which provided a better balance.

***Inquisitive* and *Learning Approach* are the two sides of openness to experience. You are an example of why Hogan split this factor into two. On the one hand, you came out very low on "thrill seeking," a classic subscale for openness to experience, yet you are at the very top of the range for the flip side, which is your openness to learning. The result is likely that you are constantly learning new things but passing what you learn through a "practicality filter." How have you seen this shape your leadership?**

I am pragmatic to an extreme level. I rarely go down rabbit holes and I get impatient when people on my staff do. I know I am not creative, so I surround myself with people who are creative and can see the possibilities. My job is to leverage their creativity, but also control it so we don't waste time and energy.

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

My biggest programmatic successes as Head of School have rarely been my brainchild. They have been other people's ideas that I have helped execute successfully.

One of the things we noticed was a difference between heads who had come up through the academic track and through the advancement track in terms of their learning approach. What thoughts have you had about learning the "sales" part of the job, which is likely better learned through experience than out of a book?

I think that my ability to learn the soft skills was impacted by being raised in a multigenerational home. I was expected to be polite to my parents' guests and mix with different groups. I love people and I always liked school, so that combination has impacted my leadership. I am a walk-around leader. I work best when I connect with people. I can send emails, but I would much rather connect with people face-to-face.

LOW LEARNING APPROACH

I typically ask people if they were surprised by their scores. Considering that you have five degrees including a doctorate and MBA, I will go ahead and jump in here and say that I was surprised by your score. What were your thoughts?

I was totally surprised by my low *Learning Approach* score.

Talk a little bit about your own educational experience as a child. How did your experience in school influence your pursuit of further education and education as a professional field?

I was raised by an educator, but I never thought about becoming an educator myself. My first thought was to become a counselor. I have always been a good student, but in high school I did not apply myself all that hard. I was more interested in sports and social life. I liked school, I liked going to school, and that has stuck with me. If I won the lottery, I would be a career student.

I got my MBA after I got my doctorate. I love curriculum and instruction, but in my first stint as Head of School I did not love the business aspect. I looked at a lot of MBA programs and chose one that included a social entrepreneurship program. They were not just trying to educate business leaders who wanted to make a lot of money. They wanted people who wanted to change the world, and that resonated with me.

When you are thinking about professional development for your staff and yourself, what are some of the most important elements you look for?

All of the research suggests that the best professional development is in-house and ongoing. I do not go for top-down development or bringing in one-off speakers. I want programs that are thematic. For instance, one year we spent the entire year just looking at formative and summative assessment. That year was so productive we extended it into a second year.

I am currently leading a pretty traditional school, so we have looked at how innovation can occur within a traditional school. All sessions are delivered by in-house administrators. All professional development runs through the academic council and they make decisions for how to employ it. They gather data throughout the year on what the faculty has gained from the development so they can map out what comes next.

Do you find yourself either in your professional and/or personal life more likely to hone existing skills or develop new ones?

On personality inventories, I tend to test more introvert than extrovert. I feel like I have changed a bit and done less of honing existing skills and trying to gain new skills, such as getting my MBA.

When you are hiring for your administrative team, what do you look for in terms of their *Learning Approach*, with theory and journal junkies on one end and practical, hands-on learners on the other?

It all has to do with who I am hiring and what I need on the team. My academic dean is a theorist. He's so intellectual he can be hard to keep up with. My upper school head is an extrovert's extrovert. She's not disinterested in theory, but her number one priority is culture. Together, they provide tremendous balance to the team. I try to be intentional about what I am looking for and the gaps that need to be filled in terms of both skills and personality. Hiring is the most important thing that I do.

One of the things we noticed was that there was no difference between average *Learning Approach* scores of candidates who had received a doctorate and those who had not. Nor was there a difference in their average *Inquisitive* score. However, those with doctorates did score significantly higher on *Ambition*, which is also your highest HPI score. What do you think motivated you to achieve that level of education?

When I got my doctorate, I was working in the public schools and I had to have a doctorate to be a superintendent. So, part of that pursuit was practical. However, I also really wanted to do it for myself. I felt frustrated by some of the other people who were in the program just for the salary bump. I felt my motivations were more balanced and I really enjoyed learning all the content.

SPECIAL TOPIC
PATH TO 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 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.
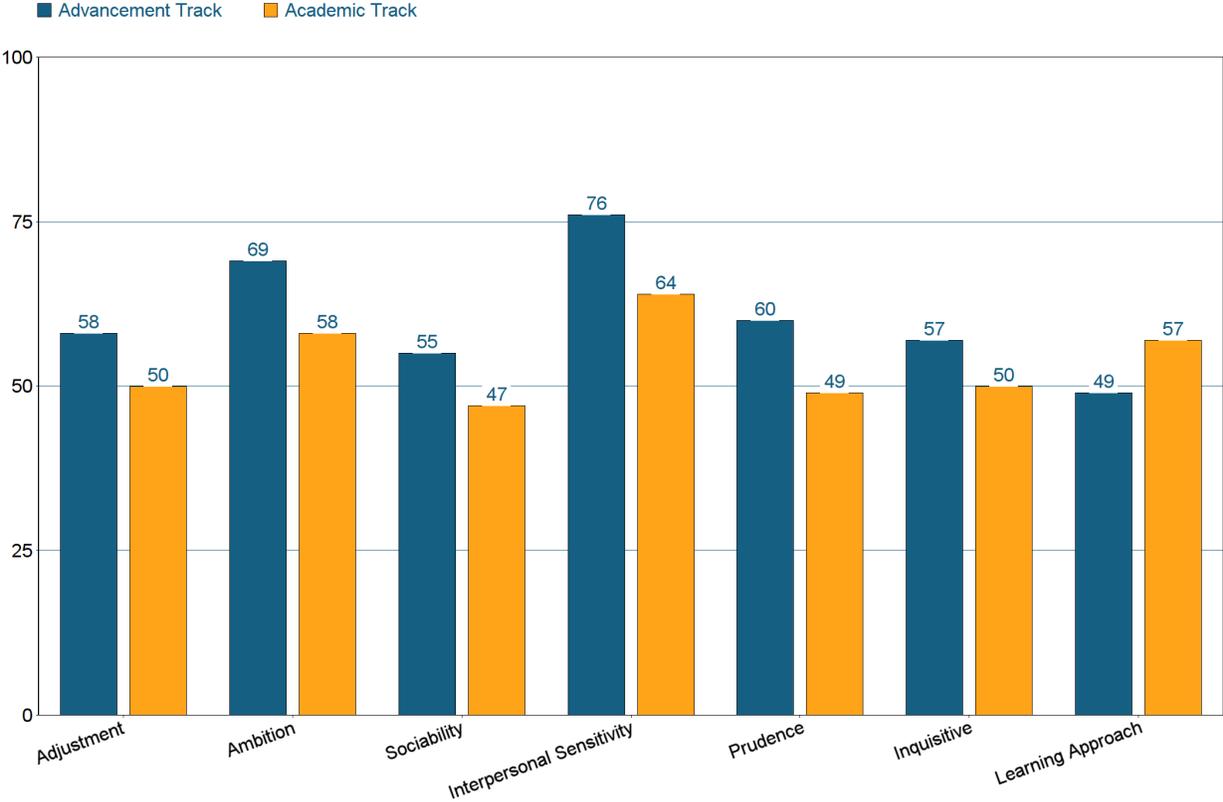
This week, we explore the personality differences between heads of school based on their path to headship, whether they came up largely through the academic side or the advancement side.

Participants' demographics are as follows, where N equals the number of participants.

<div align="center">Advancement (N=26)   Academic (N=188)</div>

Note the great disparity between the two groups. Drawing conclusions about such disparately sized groups is unwise, so we tread carefully. The path to headship still runs primarily through academic leadership, with 88% of the heads in our sample having taken that path. Though boards often say they are open to candidates with strong backgrounds in finance, fundraising, or admissions, the evidence here suggests that being a schoolhouse leader remains most attractive to boards seeking new heads of school.

HPI Comparisons: Path to Headship

Legend: ■ Advancement Track ■ Academic Track

Category	Advancement Track	Academic Track
Adjustment	58	50
Ambition	69	58
Sociability	55	47
Interpersonal Sensitivity	76	64
Prudence	60	49
Inquisitive	57	50
Learning Approach	49	57

CONCLUSIONS

With so many more heads from the academic track, we would expect to see regression to the mean within the larger group. That is, the average scores of the academic track heads should be closer to 50 than the average scores on the advancement track simply because averages tend to flatten out with a larger data set. Such is the case with six of the seven scales when comparing these two disparately sized groups. The exception, at first glance, is *Learning Approach*, where heads from the advancement track scored right at the global average (49th percentile) while heads on the academic track scored 7 points above.

One could take a defensible position that candidates coming up through the academic track would value traditional modes of education and skill building more than those coming up through the advancement track. Hogan research has shown that openness to experience, of which *Learning Approach* is a part, is the least predictive of the Five Factors in sales success,[*] and advancement in schools is much more closely associated with sales than academics. Therefore, it follows that there would be little bias regarding learning approach and people on the advancement track. They come out basically average on this scale.

In our experience, people coming up through advancement track tend to be discounted in the search process because of the fear they will not be able to serve as credible academic leaders. Though every search comes down to the individual school and candidates involved, there seems to be little evidence from a personality standpoint that advancement track candidates cannot be successful. Acknowledging the limitations of the available data, the advancement track heads in our study were more emotionally stable, ambitious, sociable, agreeable, conscientious, and curious than their academic track peers. In the coming years, it will be interesting to watch whether headships open up to more types of school personnel and the impact that diversity in professional background will have on schools.

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[*] Murphy, Stephen and Scott Davies. "Meta-analysis of a Personality Profile for Predicting Sales Success." *Hogan Assessment Systems, Inc.* 2006. https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.128.2841&rep=rep1&type=pdf.