Leadership Is in the Eye of the Beholder:

How Images of Leadership that People Have Differ Across the Organization

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Before reading any further, circle the image that best represents leadership for you. Then, write on the lines provided the words that best describe how your image symbolizes leadership:

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As a leader, do you ever feel like you aren't connecting with your team as well as you could be? As a team member, do you ever feel as if the leader is out of touch with your views? Oftentimes, people believe that these disconnects stem from things such as personality conflicts, lack of communication, being too bossy, or being a bully. But it is entirely likely that the underlying issue is that you have different implicit ideas about how a leader should behave, communicate, and interact. These ideas may be based on deeply held beliefs about what effective leadership actually is.

Not everyone has the same image of how a leader should behave. To some people a leader is someone who takes charge, while others think of a leader as a facilitator. If the leader of a group believes that a leader should take charge, while members of the group believe that a leader is a facilitator (and should not take charge), the parties will likely conflict about how the group is run. Similarly, if the leader believes his or her role is to be a facilitator, and the members are expecting a more take charge approach, disagreement and conflict is likely to emerge as well.

Therefore, it is critical to understand what your implicit image of leadership is, and which images of leadership others bring with them to the organization. Understanding your own image of leadership can help you appreciate the diverse perceptions of your colleagues and co-workers.

To better understand the most commonly held images of leadership[1], we looked at which images were selected by 443 professionals (those who don't have formal managerial responsibilities), 1,673 managers (those in the middle levels of management), and 544 executives (those at the senior-most levels of management, such as C-level executives and presidents), and how they described them.

The Survey

Participants were instructed to "Choose the picture that is closest to your image of leadership." Seventeen hand-drawn images were displayed underneath the directions. The images are based on Maxwell and Greenhalgh's (2011) research[2] and supplementary analysis. In their original work, Maxwell and Greenhalgh asked students to choose or create an image that best captures leadership for them. They collected 8,000 images from more than 8,000 students since 2001. About 30 images were consistently chosen over time. From those 30, the team made a consensus agreement that 17 images were to be used in this research.

After picking an image, participants in the current study were asked to "choose five words or phrases that best describe how your image symbolizes leadership" from a list of 48 adjectives or phrases.

What images were chosen most often?

23.4%

Of the 17 images provided, we found that professionals, managers, and executives picked Conductor, Shaking Hands, and Warrior most frequently.[3]

21.2%

17%

Just as there were similarities in which image was chosen, there were also similarities in how the images were described. Of the 48 descriptors, Table 1 shows that five were consistently picked no matter which of these three images were chosen.

Table 1

Rank and Amount of Times each Descriptor Was Chosen for the Top-3 Images Conductor, Shaking Hands, and Warrior

Descriptor	Conductor	Shaking Hands	Warrior
	Rank (% time chosen)		
Leads by Example	10 (22.8%)	1 (45.6%)	1 (76.1%)
Uses Talents of different members effectively	1 (81.4%)	2 (38.9%)	11 (16.8%)
Inspires	6 (31.6%)	3 (32.7%)	5 (38.1%)
Motivates	4 (32.4%)	4 (32.5%)	7 (33.6%)
Takes Responsibility	11 (22.6%)	5 (32.5%)	6 (34.7%)

Note: We only displayed those descriptors that were ranked in the top 12 for each image chosen.
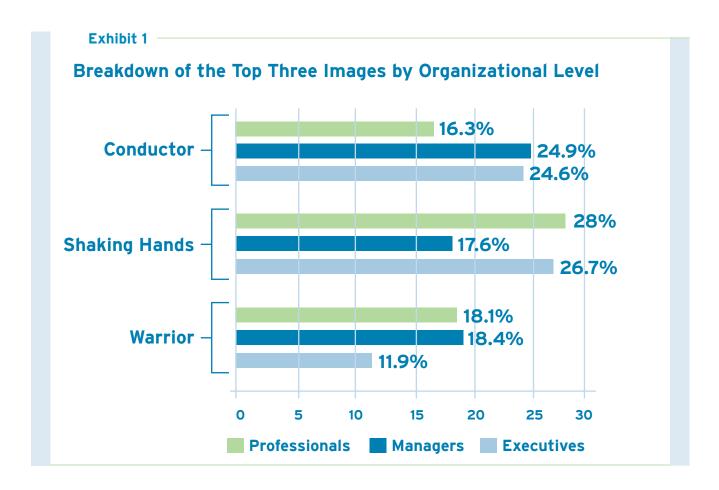
There are two takeaways from these findings. First, three images stand out from the others when it comes to representations of leadership: Conductor, Shaking Hands, and Warrior. Second, no matter the image, people often describe leadership in the same way: lead by example, take responsibility, know how to use the talents of different people effectively, inspire, and motivate.

Despite the similarities in descriptions, people may still experience conflict when working with others, and the results may give us insight into why this is the case. For example, a "Shaking Hands" leader may lead by example in a much different way than a "Warrior on horseback" leader. If workers are having conflict with each other, implicit images of leadership may be at the root cause. This may be especially important when working with others at different levels in the organization, as different perceptions of leadership may heighten conflict among professionals, managers, and executives. Since understanding subtle differences in views of leadership across levels will help you work more effectively with others, we took a closer look at how professionals, managers, and top-level executives perceive leadership.

Images and Organizational Level

Although the same three images are more likely to be chosen by professionals, managers, and executives, how frequently they were chosen by each organizational level does differ[4] (see Exhibit 1 below).

- Managers[5] and executives[6] choose Conductor more often than professionals.
- Professionals[7] and executives[8] choose Shaking Hands more often than managers.
- Professionals[9] and managers[10] choose Warrior more often than executives.

Exhibit 1

Breakdown of the Top Three Images by Organizational Level

	Professionals	Managers	Executives
Conductor	16.3%	24.9%	24.6%
Shaking Hands	28%	17.6%	26.7%
Warrior	18.1%	18.4%	11.9%

While many of the same descriptors were picked more frequently than others, there were also subtle differences that could give insight into how each of these groups may view leadership a little differently.

When "**Conductor**" was chosen – four descriptors were top picks by all groups: *uses talents of different members effectively, sets direction, motivates,* and *sees the big picture.*

Differences:

- For professionals, *achieves a common goal* was one of the top five descriptors. It was not in the top five for the other two groups.
- For managers, *creates alignment* was one of the top five descriptors. It was not in the top five for the other two groups.
- For executives, *inspires* was one of the top five descriptors. It was not in the top five for the other two groups.

When the image of Conductor was chosen, professionals, managers, and executives tended to describe it in very similar ways. Leadership to them was described as a collaborative process that is meant to foster, nurture, and help others be their best. Conductors are known for being able to listen to others and to determine what is necessary to the collective to perform at its best. People who tend to pick Conductor as their image of leadership describe it as using talents of others effectively, setting direction for the group, motivating others, and seeing the big picture.

There was one subtle difference among professionals, managers, and executives, which may be a function of the responsibilities that professionals, managers, and executives each have. Professionals tended to pick *achieves a common goal* more than the other groups. Professionals are the ones in organizations who are tasked with getting the work done and accomplishing goals set for them. This task-focus and goal-orientation may influence this description of leadership. This is very different than managers who see *creates alignment* as important. Managers are "stuck in the middle" of organizations and they must work up, down, and across organizational groups and systems. They are in the middle zone of the organization, charged with linking the vision, strategy and demands of those at the top to the realities of lower-level employees. They are coordinating a lot of moving parts. Creating alignment is more important to the identity and success of these leaders than it is for others. For executives, *inspires* was a reason they pick the image of conductor differently than other groups. Executives are at the very top of organizations, responsible for communicating the large-scale vision, mission, and culture of their organization. So the emphasis on inspiration makes sense.

When "**Shaking Hands**" was chosen – three descriptors were top picks by all groups: *leads by example, uses talents of different members effectively,* and *takes responsibility.*

Differences:

- *Shows integrity* was picked the second most often by executives. It was not in the top five for professionals or managers.
- *Empowers* was a top pick for managers and was not for the other groups.

When the image of Shaking Hands was chosen, professionals, managers, and executives tended to describe leadership in very similar ways: as collaborative and hands-on. As in the description of the Conductor image, leadership was described as a collaborative process that is meant to foster, nurture and help others be their best (e.g., uses talents of different members effectively). The descriptors *leads by example* and *takes responsibility* convey a hands-on approach to leadership that is unique to the Shaking Hands image.

There were two subtle differences worth noting in the choice of descriptors. First, managers tended to choose the descriptor *empowers* more than either executives or professionals. Managers often feel "stuck in the middle" so this indicates that middle managers feel they need more empowerment from their leaders. Managers at this level also likely realize that they are in a leadership role and likely believe that part of their role is empowering the people who work for them. A second difference was that *shows integrity* was the number two descriptor chosen for executives, but was not among the top five descriptors chosen by either professionals or managers. While acting with integrity is important for everyone in an organization, because of the level of scrutiny they undergo from both inside and outside of their organization it is especially important for executives. Research is consistent with this choice of descriptors, and shows that integrity is a much more important predictor of performance for top-level executives than those lower in the organization.[11] While it is important for everyone in an organization to have integrity, it is likely that executives realize that they are in the spotlight and therefore integrity is more central to their ideas of what leadership is.

When "**Warrior**" was chosen – four descriptors were top picks by all groups: *leads by example, leads the way, takes charge*, and *inspires*.

Difference:

- *Takes responsibility* was one of the top five descriptors chosen by professionals. It was not in the top five for managers and executives.

When Warrior was chosen, people tended to describe leadership much differently than Conductor or Shaking Hands. The descriptors chosen for Warrior reflect that leadership is an active process in which everything revolves around what the leader himself or herself can do. The leader is out in front of everyone and is the embodiment of the endeavor (e.g., takes charge, leads by example, leads the way, inspires). The Warrior can be an expert who rides in to fix a crisis situation. The one difference in descriptions again was with professionals. They tended to choose *takes responsibility* more than the other groups. As discussed before, their task-focus and goal-orientation combined with the "out-in-front" image of a Warrior on horseback may influence this description of leadership particularly with professionals.

Age or Gender: Any Differences?

We also wanted know whether there were demographic differences of choosing the images within each group. We found no generational differences within the professional group[12] - each image was as likely to be chosen by a Millennial professional, as a Gen Xer, Early and Late Boomer, or Silent professional.[13]

With regard to gender, while there were no differences for Shaking Hands and Conductor (men and women were equally likely to choose each), there was a difference for the Warrior image. Male professionals[14] and managers[15] were more likely to choose Warrior than were female professionals and managers. We also saw that male Gen X managers were more likely to pick Warrior than male Baby Boomers managers[16] but not so for females. Men and women at the top-level were equally likely to choose the Warrior image.

Applying These Findings to Your Work

We know that a majority of people surveyed chose images of a Conductor, Shaking Hands, and Warrior more frequently than the other images of leadership. At the same time, there are subtle differences in frequency of selection and descriptions of images. So if you are working with someone who thinks of a leader as a Warrior, don't be surprised if they want to take charge, lead the way, and be an inspiration to get things done. If someone perceives leadership as Shaking Hands, they probably see leadership in terms of very close collaboration. A similarly close collaboration might be the perspective of those who view leadership as a Conductor; the nuance of difference is that there may be slightly less hands-on and more a way of fostering an environment where all are engaged and can be successful.

In light of our results, you can take a couple of steps to help create a connection when you believe there is a disconnect between perceptions of how leaders should behave.

First, think about your own image of leadership. How does your image translate into the way you behave as a leader, and how you expect others to behave as leaders? Second, consider others' images of leadership, and how leadership behavior may be perceived by others. Is your image similar to or different from those of the people around you? Where are the overlaps and where are the mismatches? Are the mismatches limiting your performance or the performance of your group or organization? Thinking about perceptions of leadership can provide insight into how to approach a peer or teammate or boss. For example, you might have a better chance of influencing someone if you communicate in a way that fits his or her image of leadership. You might emphasize the *taking charge* angle with some who may view leadership as a Warrior on horseback, or the *use of talents* angle with others who may view leadership as Shaking Hands or as a Conductor. You need to be able to meet people where they are, which means understanding what their image is of how a leader should behave, and managing your own behavior appropriately. Do you need to adapt your image of a leader to be more inclusive of different approaches?

Take-Away Message

Images can be instructive for identifying and articulating our assumptions about leadership. They can help clarify what you expect of yourself as a leader – and help you see how differently people may expect leaders to behave. Many people have different ideas about what leadership looks like, and these differences in images of effective leadership can result in disagreement about process and disconnection among colleagues and team members who may hold different images of leadership. Leadership isn't necessarily about always taking charge or about always having a close collaboration. But for some people it is, and understanding your co-workers' images of leadership will help you work with them more effectively. If you know what images and expectations others have about leadership, you will be able to adjust or tailor your behavior or messages to better meet the needs of different perspectives. You will be able to identify the characteristics of your view that might confuse or bother others, allowing you to more effectively meet your colleagues where they are, which is a critical component of every leader's job.

About the Research

The World Leadership Survey (WLS) has continued to collect data online in English since its inception in March 2008, and began collecting data in twelve additional languages in March 2009. Participants in the research come through partner organizations, interested individuals, and enrollment in CCL programs.

Participants fill out a survey online that is hosted by Clear Picture Corporation and takes them approximately 20 minutes. In thanks for their participation, participants receive a free CCL Guidebook to download immediately upon completion of the survey. Questions about the survey are sent to the World Leadership Survey e-mail account at WorldLeadershipSurvey@ccl.org.

The sample for this study consisted of 443 professionals (e.g., individual contributors who do not manage people), 1,673 upper-middle-level managers (e.g., department executives), and 544 top-level executives (e.g., CEO, presidents) who took the WLS between March 2008 and April, 2013. All were from the United States. Table 2 gives demographic information for each group in our study.

Table 2

Demographic Information of Professional (n = 443)
Upper-Middle-Level Managers (n = 1,673) and Top-Level Executives (n = 544)

Demographic Variable	Professional	Upper-Middle-Level Manager	Top-Level Executive
Gender	46.3% male	56.2% male	56.4% male
Race	76.9% Caucasian	84.6% Caucasion	79.9% Caucasian
Age	M=41.23 years (SD=13.20)	M-45.47 years (SD=8.14)	M=49.69 years (SD=10.35)
Sector	83.7% private sector	85.5% private sector	91.5% private sector

Endnotes

[1] The images and descriptors have previously been used to help people understand their own perceptions of leadership and to see how their perceptions compare to those of others. The images helped demonstrate the relevance of leadership and enrich conversations about theories of leadership. The use of images can help groups of people construct a collective picture of what leadership is, while at the same time, respects a person's own view of what leadership is. The images help people consider what traits, behaviors, or styles of leadership are part of their definition of leadership.

[2] Maxwell, C. I., & Greenhalgh, A. M. (2011). Images of leadership: A new exercise to teach leadership from a social constructionist perspective. *Organization Management Journal, 8*, 106-110.

[3] The other images were: Geese in formation; Tree; Puzzle; Bridge; Ripples in water; Balancing on a tightrope; Speaking to a crowd; Mountain; Sign with directions; Candle flame; Mother holding a child; Baby ducks with mother; Making a stand; and Ocean. None of these were chosen by more than 10% of respondents.

[4] Shaking Hands: $\chi^2 (2) = 35.13$, $p < .001$; Warrior: $\chi^2 (2) = 12.36$, $p < .01$; Conductor: $\chi^2 (2) = 15.25$, $p < .001$.

[5] $\chi^2 (1) = 14.83$, $p < .001$.

[6] $\chi^2 (1) = 10.38$, $p < .01$.

[7] $\chi^2 (1) = 23.98$, $p < .001$.

[8] $\chi^2 (1) = 21.32$, $p < .001$

[9] $\chi^2 (1) = 7.27$, $p < .01$.

[10] $\chi^2 (1) = 12.05$, $p < .01$.

[11] Gentry, W. A., Cullen, K. L., Sosik, J. J., Chun, J. U., Leupold, C. R., & Tonidandel, S. (2013). Integrity's place among the character strengths of middle-level managers and top-level executives. *The Leadership Quarterly, 24*, 395-404.

[12] Shaking Hands: $\chi^2 (4) = 5.34$, $p = .25$; Warrior: $\chi^2 (4) = 8.44$, $p = .08$; Conductor: $\chi^2 (4) = 0.92$, $p = .93$.

[13] Not enough people were in each of the generations for upper-middle-level managers and top-level executives to run this type of analysis.

[14] $\chi^2 (1) = 7.40$, $p < .01$.

[15] $\chi^2 (1) = 53.27$, $p < .001$.

[16] $\chi^2 (2) = 14.96$, $p < .01$.

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