



The Whole PackageTM

The Research that Redefines
What It Means to Lead

Part I: Macro Findings and Trends



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Introduction

Have you ever experienced a leader and thought, **"They are the whole package"**? I have been asking this question of thousands of people for several months, and their answer is a near universal, **"Yes."**

The follow-up question is more difficult:

"What made you see that leader as the whole package?"

The difficulty answering that question led to this study.

For the purposes of this study, a leader who is the whole package excels in every area of responsibility and performance. This individual embodies everything you would want in a leader. They are not perfect, but this is someone you would voluntarily follow every day.

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT TO YOU.

Exceptional leaders and exceptional leadership matters.

The challenges, problems, and opportunities we face require leaders operating at the top of their game.

We inherently know that the world in which we live is more uncertain, complex, and unpredictable. The pace of change is, barring a total societal meltdown, as slow as it will be in our lifetime.

If leaders do not have or display the right attributes, their effectiveness is limited!

-Colin Powell

This is the water in which we find ourselves swimming. When people drown, it is never the water's fault.

Leaders are the catalyzing force that shapes an organization's long-term sustainability and success for organizations and communities. The "high" in high performing teams is determined by the capacity and capability of the leader to inspire volunteered commitment to a shared purpose, vision, and values.

Sustainable solutions demand leaders who can generate volunteered commitment. Unfortunately, organizations continue to struggle with engaging the hearts, inspiring the minds, and focusing the actions of their teams.

NEED PROOF?

Despite all of the books, articles, workshops, seminars, conference presentations, podcasts, and training videos, we are not substantially better at change, employee engagement, performance management, coaching, innovation, empowerment, and creating strong cultures today than we were 25+ years ago.

Logic dictates that we should ask the question:

Is the real problem that we don't have enough truly exceptional leaders that people want to follow?

On a personal level, leadership — the ability to influence the actions and outcomes of others to deliver positive results and sustain positive relationships — determines an individual's success.

John Maxwell defines it as the Law of the Lid: "Leadership ability is the lid that determines a person's level of effectiveness. The lower an individual's ability to lead, the lower the lid on his potential."



Half of CEOs believe developing their next generation of leaders is a leading challenge. Just 12% express confidence in their bench.

-DDI

Leadership skills are typically at the top of the list of competencies that recruiters focus on when hiring, or when managers are promoted from within an organization.

-IMD International

Goals of the Study

This study seeks to understand what makes a leader exceptional from the follower's perspective. We want to allow data, rather than individual experience or theory, to inform us about what individuals and organizations can do to increase the opportunities for volunteered commitment among those it counts as "followers."

The study seeks to answer these four questions:

- **What are the common characteristics of leaders who are identified as "the best leader you have encountered?"**
- **What are the most important competencies, behaviors, and traits of a leader who is identified as The Whole Package?**
- **What are the important challenges leaders must address in the next 10 years to succeed?**
- **What impact do leaders who are viewed as the whole package have on followers?**

The breadth and depth of the data necessitates breaking the results into four easily digestible parts:

- I Macro Findings and Trends
- II What Makes a Leader the Whole Package
- III Key Issues Leaders Must Address in the Future
- IV The Whole Package™ Playbook





Macro Level Findings and Trends

Twelve key findings and trends emerged about enduring, successful leadership and what it takes to be a leader that others volunteer to follow.

This dataset paints a picture of leadership that is multi-dimensional, consistently valued, and shared across identity groups. The results highlight nuanced differences that offer key insights for leadership selection and development, mentorship, inclusiveness, culture, and change.



Everything is important ... simultaneously and differently.

As common sense suggests, the twelve characteristics and competencies identified important are all important for being viewed as "The Whole Package". The weighted averages ranged from 3.27 to 4.30 on a 5-point scale with "5" being very important.

Likewise, responses across various work tenures, job roles, and demographic groups were remarkably similar on most questions. This suggests a shared understanding or experience of leadership norms at a macro level within organizations and across society as a whole.

There are, however, important differences in importance between demographic groups. These micro findings will be addressed in Part II of this series.

Understanding and adapting to these differences are crucial if you are influencing down, up, or across your organization. Likewise, the ability to be remembered as an endearing and enduring influence depends on being great (or at least good) in every area simultaneously. **Leaders viewed as the whole package think and operate in simultaneous dimensions not compartmentalized levels, steps, or functions.**

The Whole Package Competencies



"If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader."

- John Quincy Adams



Leaders appear in many roles, but teachers, coaches, family members, and mentors matter most.

Respondents reported encountering the best leaders in roles like teachers, coaches, family members, and mentors, not just at work.

These categories are often ranked as highly impactful especially among non-Caucasian and younger respondents. Respondents under the age of 35 were statistically more likely to identify a teacher, coach, or family member as the best leader they have ever encountered. **Leaders wondering how to actively engage and influence the youngest members of their teams should think and act more like a teacher than a boss.**

Top Influential Leader Types



"My best leader was a coach that pushed me and made me quite a different player. He made me play my strengths and embody that with power and resilience. Overall, he unlocked me to become my best-self as an athlete."

-Respondent Comment

3 Statistically significant differences exist, but not where you might expect.

Consistent age-based differences did not appear across the identified characteristics and competencies. This challenges conventional thinking that the latest “young generation” wants completely different experiences from their leader. They want the same things differently.

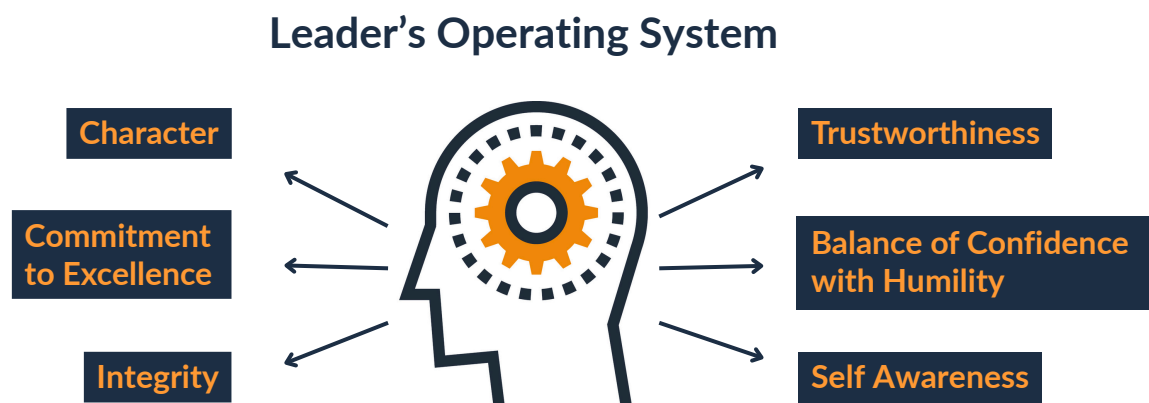
Notable statistical differences were found based on ethnicity and to some degree gender. For example, Caucasian respondents were more likely to select 'mentor' or 'middle manager', while Black and Asian respondents more often cited teachers or coaches. Men were statistically more likely to identify senior and middle managers as the best leader they have ever encountered suggesting that the potential for discrepancies in access to these leaders. Males place a higher level of importance on expertise, experience, and status than females.

Despite the differences in lived experience and perspective, expectations for what makes a leader the whole package were surprisingly aligned across job roles and tenures at the macro level.

4 Character is non-negotiable.

The leader’s operating system which is defined as character, commitment to excellence, integrity, trustworthiness, self-awareness, and balance of confidence with humility was identified as the overall most important factor in determining a leader’s effectiveness.

This characteristic becomes more important as respondents grow older, suggesting that experience has taught them that being honest, fair, respectful, and self-aware are the hallmarks of effective leadership that stands the test of time.



5 Caring is now a core competency.

Promoting mental, physical, and emotional health is the #1 factor that respondents identified as very important for a leader's success in the future.

Key word analysis of descriptions about the best leader respondents have ever encountered included empathy, respect, listening more than speaking, and making the individual feel valued across age groups. This data upends popular media memes that younger generations are less resilient. Other age groups value a leader who cares about them. The youngest generation gives voice to it.

The leader's ability to create connections, show they care, and proactively address the mental, physical, and emotional needs of followers has moved from "nice to have" to essential.

6 Connection over charisma.

Consistent presence, authentic connection, and emotional availability outweighs executive polish.

Respondents across all age and ethnic groups viewed the ability to authentically connect with followers as crucial for a leader to be viewed as the whole package with one exception. The Asian population was statistically less likely to see this as very important for a leader to be effective. The message is clear, however.

Personal persona, charisma, and presentation might be important in securing the job, but leaders are remembered for being human, not flashy.



"She listened more than she spoke, made people feel seen and valued, and made tough decisions with courage and compassion. What really stood out was her ability to inspire others to believe in a bigger mission, even when the path wasn't easy. Her leadership made everyone around them better."

-Respondent Comment

7

Empowerment and development build legacy.

Investing in the growth and development of others is a hallmark of leaders who are the whole package. The ability to develop others was ranked as an important competency by all demographic groups.

Retaining and growing talent was ranked as a Top 5 factor in determining a leader's success in the future. Respondents' descriptions of the best leaders they had ever encountered consistently referred to those who pushed them to grow, showed confidence by letting them do their jobs, and allowed them to fail as part of the learning process. **People remember who helped them grow.**

“He believed in me more than I believed in myself. He let me fail as part of my learning experience. Don't let a loss steal my enthusiasm because we sometimes win by losing.”

-Respondent Comment



8

Impact, not age or status, determines influence.

Age and title are irrelevant to perceived leadership excellence. Influence is earned, not given. While over 70% of respondents said that the best leader they ever encountered was older than them, age is not a defining criterion for a leader being viewed as the whole package. Neither are status or position.

The impact of a leader's intellect in how they are perceived as a leader diminishes by age group with the GenZ and Millennial cohorts placing less value on it than Gen X or Baby Boomer respondents.

The best leaders make others feel seen, valued, and supported.

9 Consistent presence builds trust.

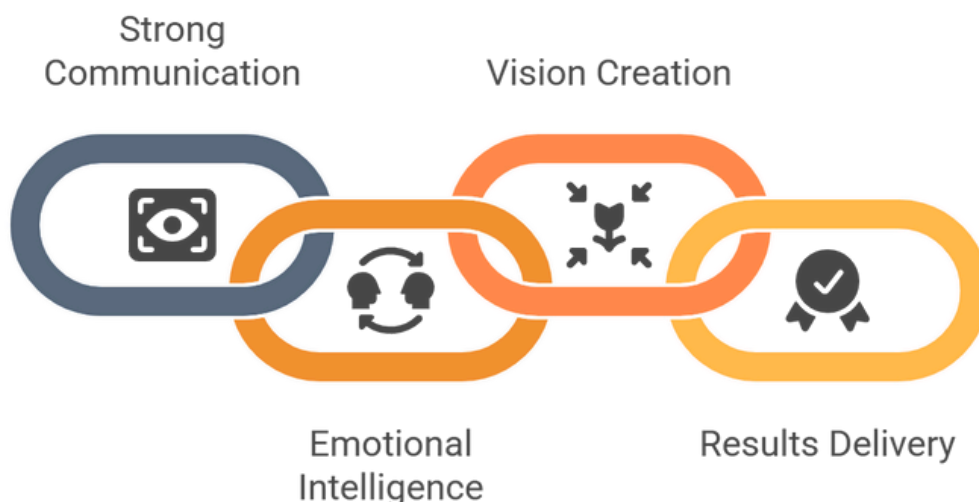
Predictability enhances trust. Consistent behavior and calm presence win respect. Over 75% of respondents said that the best leader they had ever encountered was an immediate supervisor, teacher, coach, or family member all individuals with consistent presence. The size of this number suggests that while individuals might admire leaders with whom they do not have regular contact, they are profoundly influenced when they interact with exceptional leaders on a regular basis. The value of consistent, positive presence creates important implications for how organizations select and develop front-line leaders. Even more, **navigating uncertainty requires organizations to prioritize deliberate and intentional access to exceptional leadership.**

10 Traditional competencies are basic expectations.

Strong communication, emotional intelligence, creating vision, and delivering results are baseline expectations rather than differentiators. This realization has implications for leadership selection and development. It will no longer be enough to select leaders based on their experience, expertise, and even personality if the goal is to leverage the impact whole-package leaders can bring to volunteered engagement and productivity.

The best organizations will ask this question: "If this leadership job could talk, what would it tell us that it needs to help the team flourish?"

Today's Baseline for Effective Leadership



11 A generational realignment in what is important to followers is underway.

While not always explicitly labeled, questions tied to inclusivity, advocacy, and understanding were more positively rated by younger and more diverse respondents. Responses to issues such as addressing climate change and ensuring social justice, and building strong relationships reinforce the idea that being socially aware and people-centric will continue as priorities for younger generations in the immediate future.

It is too early to tell if current tendencies continue into older adulthood. Baby Boomers protested for the social justice issues of their time as young adults, and social awareness issues do not rate as significantly important to that group today.

12 Culture and people first.

Culture creation is more important than vision casting for successful leadership in the future. Building, empowering, and retaining strong teams are the leadership successes that contribute to lasting results. It is cliché, but the words of Ret. Admiral Grace Hopper ring true: "You manage data and things. You lead people."

Strategy and vision are things. **Leading people toward a culture of excellence is the vehicle to arrive where the organization needs and wants to be in the future.**

Results of Culture and People First Leadership



Strong Teams

Creating capable, cohesive teams through collaboration and trust.



Empowerment

Providing team members with autonomy and resources to excel.



Retention

Ensuring valuable team members stay engaged and committed.

Why Leaders who are the Whole Package Matter Today

Phase II of this study sought to understand the impact of exceptional leaders, the whole package on the thinking, choices, and performance of followers.

The goal was to determine if investing in and cultivating exceptional leaders at every level of the organization has an impact great enough to make it a priority regardless of the economy, operating time horizon, or operational challenges.

Other studies have shown that delaying leadership development [can reduce profits](#) by as much as 7 percent. Likewise, about 77 percent of organizations [report](#) leadership gaps at various levels.

Nevertheless, it is easy to view leadership development as a “luxury” to cut when the economy slows or margins are squeezed. It can be even more attractive when organizations are in turn-around mode or have a short-term focus on increasing EBITDA.

Even in good times, every allocation decision must be evaluated against this question: Will it help us be more effective and efficient? Is this (proverbial) juice worth the squeeze?

The results paint a vivid picture of the positive impact an exceptional leader can have on performance, accountability, engagement, acceptance of change, retention, and culture all of which are critical for consistently delivering positive results in challenging, changing, and competitive environments.



An exceptional leader has significant impact across all the behaviors that contribute to organizational success.

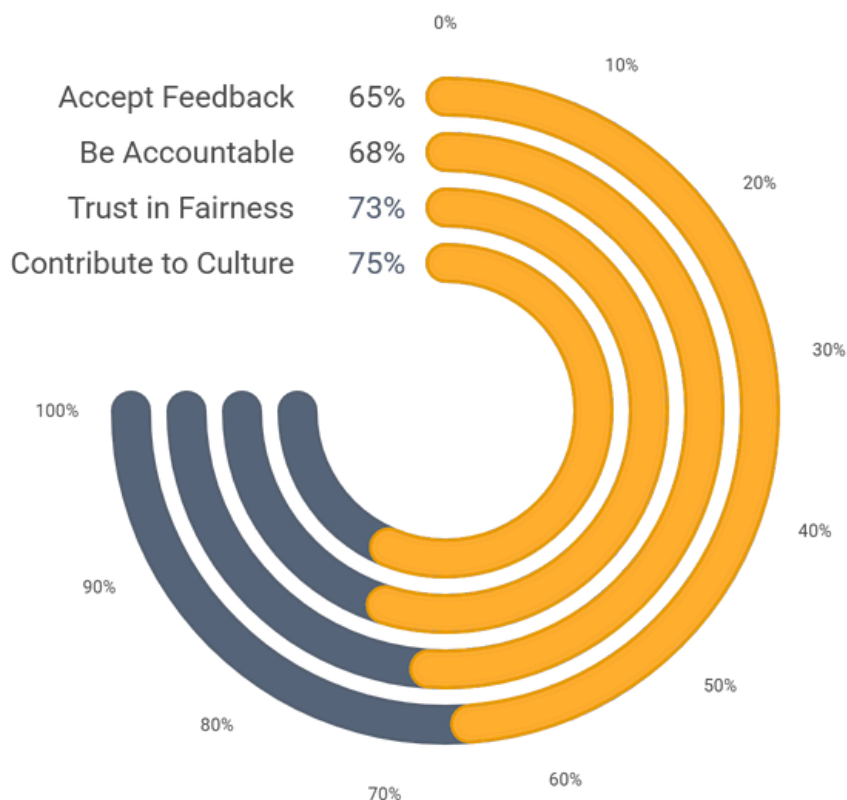
The majority of respondents credit exceptional leaders with a substantial or significant impact on their productivity, engagement, openness to change, stress at work, and continuous improvement.

More importantly, working for an exceptional leader was rated as an important or very important influence on their choice to:

- Accept feedback on the need to improve: 65%
- Be accountable for their performance: 68%
- Trust that they are being treated fairly: 73%
- Contribute to a positive work culture: 75%

Organizations faced with economic or operational challenges and those working to scale and grow share the need for fully engaged teams diligently working to succeed. Exceptional leaders are the crucial catalyst.

Impact of Exceptional Leaders on Employee Behavior



The influence is even greater with your best team members.

Study participants were asked to self-select their personal level of performance on the following scale:

- Poor performer. (1.78% of respondents)
- Marginal performer. (3.72% of respondents)
- Solid performer. (21.49% of respondents)
- Above Average performer. (44.59% of respondents)
- Star performer. (28.43% of respondents)

As comparison, a [study conducted](#) by Culture Amp of 741 companies representing over 200,000 employees found the following:

- Under performers: 4%
- Solid performers: 44%
- Good performers: 34%
- High performers: 8%

The results generally correlate at the low end of performance ratings, and our respondents tend to view themselves more positively at the high end of performance.

This is both interesting and insignificant in the context of a leader's impact. Our interest is in how respondents see themselves and the correlation of their view with the level of impact or importance an exceptional leader plays in their choices and performance.

Over 85 percent of self-rated star performers said that having an exceptional leader plays an important or very important role in their contribution to a positive work culture. Almost 74 percent said that exceptional leaders have a substantial or significant impact on their productivity. Similar levels of influence are evident in those self-rating as Solid and Above Average performers.

A group of five diverse office workers (three women and two men) are gathered around a table in a modern office setting, celebrating. They are all smiling and raising their fists in a gesture of triumph. In the background, there are large windows and office equipment like laptops and monitors.

"Having an exceptional leader makes me want to stay at a job and want to contribute my fair share. Having a good leader helps me to not feel like I'm just a number in the company."

-Respondent Comment

"An excellent leader is a force multiplier of people and skills. Bad management kills productivity and ruins the best."

-Respondent Comment

Exceptional leaders can offset organizational shortcomings and increase retention.

Poor leadership [has long been noted](#) as a driver of disengagement and turnover. Many of the qualitative responses noted that great leaders serve as buffers during challenging times. They help their team navigate ambiguity, conflict, and poor organizational systems.

Over 50 percent of the total respondents indicated that an exceptional leader affects their decision to seek a new job or consider a role for which they are recruited. Star performers expressed a significantly higher willingness to pursue other job opportunities than other groups.

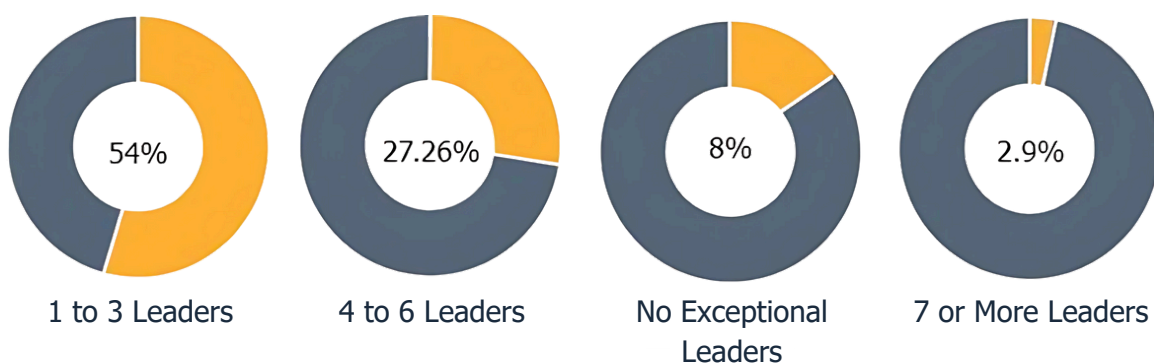
Why don't organizations see the benefits of exceptional leadership.

It is simple. Exceptional leaders who possess the whole package of desirable competencies, traits, and behaviors are exceedingly rare.

Fifty-four percent of the total respondents had only personally experienced 1 to 3 of these exceptional leaders in their lifetime. Another 27.26 percent have experienced 4 to 6, and almost 8 percent have no experience with a truly exceptional leader. Only 2.9% of respondents over the age of 55 had encountered 7 or more despite decades of work experience.

Despite an [estimated](#) \$366 billion invested globally in leadership development each year, we don't have enough leaders that people want to follow.

Frequency of Encountering Exceptional Leaders



Key Takeaways and Recommendations

A detailed action plan will be covered in a future report (The Whole Package™ Playbook). In the meantime, there are important macro takeaways for organizations and individuals. Collectively, they can be summarized in three broad categories:

- Reframe
- Rethink
- Refresh and revise

Reframing strategies:

The primary premise to be taken from this study is this:

Delivering results is a fundamental expectation. Exceptional leaders who are viewed as The Whole Package are distinguished by a legacy that influences behavior and performance even when they are no longer around. The legacy is built with and owned by followers.

“Buy the premise.
Buy the bit.”

-Johnny Carson

This reframing of what it means to be an exceptional leader calls leaders forward as stewards and facilitators of sustained excellence for individuals and the organization. Organizationally, the idea that leadership is serving the needs of followers not just the goals of the organization fundamentally alters how leaders operate.

Students of leadership will immediately notice the strong similarity to Robert K. Greenleaf's [Servant Leadership](#) model first shared in 1970. This study reinforces Greenleaf's emphasis on putting others first, empathy, fostering personal growth, and community building. The argument could be made that this study provides quantitative and qualitative research that Greenleaf's model has occasionally been criticized for lacking.

Findings of this study could also fit into the results-focused Transformational Leadership framework introduced by James MacGregor [Burns in 1978](#). Like Transformational Leadership, leaders who are The Whole Package inspire followers to achieve results. It produces increased job satisfaction and personal growth.

Transformational Leadership has shown flaws, too. Leaders can use its concepts for destructive purposes and to promote self-interest. It can also increase stress among followers and unethical behavior.

Leaders who are the whole package seek to balance both results and relationships; realizing that leaders serve multiple constituencies at the same time.

It acknowledges that difficult choices are always required when balancing the needs of individuals with the needs of the organization. These exceptional leaders do not easily give up on one in favor of the other. They fight to protect both and are aware that followers are always watching. They do not take their desire to leave a legacy lightly.

There will, undoubtedly, be those who consider that a “cop out” response or naïve thinking.

It is, rather, an aspirational goal that, as the data shows, is rarely achieved. Anyone can be a Servant Leader with the right mindset and moral compass. Transformational leadership skills can be mastered. Both can lead to leadership success, but they do not make someone The Whole Package with enduring and endearing impact.

Individually, the choice to become The Whole Package leader expands their frame of reference for personal and professional development. The focus is internal on the operating system and approach to the job as well as external to master strategies and tactics.

The lessons from this study move from interesting to essential when leadership is reframed in this way.



Rethinking strategies:

Reframing opens the possibility of rethinking traditionally held beliefs about leaders and leadership. This study has shown that contrary to conventional thinking:

The most Impactful leadership occurs outside of the C-Suite and positions of power.

Executives and top leaders might be the primary shapers of leadership experience and culture at work, but they are not necessarily the most remembered. The data across all groups shows that teachers, mentors, family members, and front-line supervisors are most remembered for their lasting impact. This suggests that day-to-day relational leadership, not title or status, leaves a deeper mark.

Diverse populations define leadership differently.

There is no one consistent definition that makes a leader exceptional. The data shows a more nuanced view. While many questions showed agreement across demographics, some statistically significant ethnic and gender disparities emerged.

”Exceptional leaders inspire me through their example. They sacrifice and labor for the benefit of others.”

- Respondent Comment

For instance, non-Caucasian and younger respondents placed more emphasis on traits like empathy, advocacy, and inclusiveness. Older and Caucasian respondents valued vision and integrity more. Men and women were similar around most questions, but differences emerged in how they experience mentorship, inclusion, and advocacy.

Expectations are not static across the population. They evolve with identity and generation. Surface-level consensus can mask deeper cultural disconnects. The best leaders will look below the surface to understand the needs that can go unspoken.

Work tenure does not shape perspective as strongly as assumed.

Increased experience does not lead to different views on what makes an exceptional leader. The data shows that respondents with 1 year of work experience and those with 25+ years answered most leadership questions in similar or nearly identical ways. This suggests that organizational culture or generational change may be leveling out differences once attributed to tenure.

Older workers are more skeptical about exceptional leadership.

The data shows that older workers (especially 55–64) consistently gave lower ratings or fell into Bottom 2 categories of agreement more often. This suggests potential disillusionment or unmet expectations of leadership in practice.

It is crucial that leaders not confuse silence or not speaking forcefully about leadership performance with acceptance, agreement, or alignment. They must consider that the biggest difference between their youngest and oldest team members is the willingness to speak up rather than just accept what they cannot change.

Refresh and revise strategies:

A new perspective and the willingness to rethink assumptions leads the way to refreshing and/or revising operational processes, systems, and development approaches.

Organizations should examine and update:

- Leadership selection criteria.
- Assessment and evaluation processes.
- Development approaches that move from disconnected strategies and tactics to interconnected dimensions.
- Processes to enhance access and connection across all constituent groups.
- A leadership approach that builds a culture of excellence rather than settling for an excellent culture that makes people happy in the short term.

Individuals must update their mindset and operating system. Traditional competencies are base line expectations. Followers want leaders who authentically connect with them and are relentlessly focused on helping them succeed. The shift from being the boss to being the partner who mentors and coaches is underway. Connection and investment are the strategies for long-term legacy.



Conclusion

This genesis of this study was a question: "Have you ever experienced a leader and thought, 'They are the whole package?'"

It led to an effort to answer and understand these four questions:

What are the common characteristics of leaders who are identified as "the best leader you have encountered?"

What are the most important competencies, behaviors, and traits of a leader who is identified as The Whole Package?

What are the important challenges leaders must address in the next 10 years to succeed?

What impact do leaders who are viewed as The Whole Package have on followers?

The result is a nuanced view laced with surprises. Most important, this study shines a spotlight on how followers view the leaders who leave an enduring and endearing legacy. Its findings are a call to action to redefine and reframe what it means to be an exceptional leader. That call to action must be met with rethinking assumptions and revising our strategies for identifying and developing leaders.

We now know or at least come closer to knowing what it takes to be the leader people want to follow.



Methodology

- Phase one of this study drew 900 responses to a survey that included open-ended questions and 5-point Likert scoring of characteristics, competencies, and challenges.
- That number was “cleaned” to ensure complete answers, and 75 responses were removed. The sample size has a +/-3% margin of error at a 95% reliability, the accepted gold standard for quantitative and qualitative research.
- The vast majority of respondents (89%) were from the United States. Responses were also received from Europe, South America, the Middle East, and Asia-Pacific regions. While the international sample size is not large enough to draw conclusions, accurate comparisons can be made. Any significant differences will be noted in the appropriate part of these reports.
- Survey demographics were a representative mix based on:
 - Age
 - Race and ethnicity
 - Gender
 - Job position
 - Education level
 - Income level (in the United States)
 - Number of years in the workforce
- Current position level from hourly employees to founders and senior executives. They included individual contributors, office/administrative staff, IT and technology staff, supervisors and managers, and sales professionals.
- Phase two of the study used 5-point Likert scale to determine the impact leaders with enduring and endearing impact (the Whole Package) have on individual choices and performance at work. One open-ended question was included to allow respondents to share additional ideas and observations. The results of the open-ended question had no significant impact on the study’s results.
- The phase two survey was provided to 600 individuals in the United States and has a +/- 4% margin of error at a 95% reliability. The survey used the same demographic groups as the initial survey.

About The Team

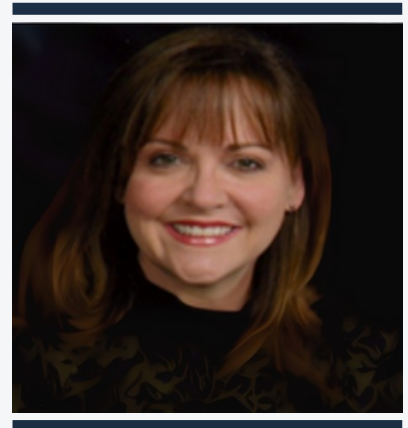
Randy Pennington - Primary Author

Randy Pennington helps leaders, teams, and companies deliver positive results in a world of accelerating change and increasing demands. He is a thirty-year business performance veteran, award-winning author, consultant, strategist, and coach has been named one of the top 30 voices on corporate culture for 10 consecutive years by the Global Gurus organization. Randy is the author of three books: *Make Change Work*, *Results Rule!*, and *On My Honor, I Will*. He is an instructor in the Cox Business Leadership Center at Southern Methodist University.



Paula Julian, Ph.D. - Contributor

Paula Julian is an experienced brand planner and researcher who blends her strategic marketing skills with advanced professional training in consumer marketing research. She has extensive direct marketing, brand development, and research experience with some of North America's best-known agencies including Bozell Worldwide, Rapp Collins Worldwide, and Ackerman McQueen. Paula holds a doctorate degree in community psychology with an emphasis in organizational development from the University of Missouri.



Gretchen Beck - Contributor

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The Whole Package™

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