

## Leader Potential: Something You Have or Something You Can Grow?

To answer the question above, you must first revisit two long-standing debates in the field of organizational psychology:

- Are leaders *born or made*?
- Which is more important for performance - *cognitive ability or motivation*?

Recent experiences have led me to rethink my position on these two questions as they relate to the topic of leader potential. But I share those experiences with the caveat that offering a comprehensive and/or definitive answer to either question, as either an academic or a practitioner, is beyond the scope and intent of this article.

### Debate #1: The Making of a Leader

I tend to be someone who believes that there is usually some truth in both sides of any story. So, no matter how many theories I read on the topic of leadership, I see value in believing that both nature and nurture likely contribute to one's overall leader potential.

Indeed, there are [countless studies and articles](#) that would have you believe that leaders are in fact made, not born. And, it makes perfect sense that you can grow your leadership skills by identifying key competencies that lead to success within a given environment and coaching leaders to grow in those areas.

But, if you've ever worked with someone who others all identify as a "natural born leader," you may conclude that great leaders likely start out with things that help them "get ahead," be it personality traits, charisma, cognitive ability or some other seemingly innate characteristic.

Although personality is largely engrained by the age of 18, we often consider it in helping leaders understand how they approach the world and how they can adjust their natural "steady state" a bit to meet the demands of their environment.

Likewise, we often consider a leader's cognitive capacity in some way when examining potential (e.g., often as the output of that ability examining decision making, problem solving, critical thinking or creativity, performance, etc.). We may also recommend a few books to a struggling leader to sharpen critical thinking skills or identify tips for "thinking

outside the box,” but there are differing schools of thought with regard to how much someone can really improve cognitive functioning during adult years.

While research indicates that cognitive ability is a strong predictor of job performance and thus should not be overlooked, we also know that it doesn't tell the “whole story” when it comes to leader potential. Most of us have worked with the “smartest person in the room,” who either couldn't or wouldn't get along well with others or adapt to a changing environment. This type of leader opens the door to the need to further discuss the role of motivation in understanding and measuring leader potential.

That brings us to the second question.

### Debate #2: Ability vs. Motivation

A meta-analysis published in January in the Journal of Management caused me to pause and reflect on my understanding of the intersection of motivation and ability<sup>[1]</sup>. Looking at samples of more than 8,500 individuals across dozens of studies, the researchers concluded, among other findings, that the effects of ability and motivation on performance are *additive* rather than *multiplicative*, meaning they would interact to impact performance.

Further, while ability was somewhat more important for training performance or work-related tasks, ability and motivation were *similarly* important for job performance - and only weakly correlated with one another. This suggests that organizations should consider both variables when trying to predict performance. And the “additive” nature of the relationship found suggests that individuals should be able to “compensate” for a low score on ability with a higher score on motivation (and vice versa).

So, the question then becomes, *Should organizations invest more in identifying leader potential in their applicants or developing potential among their current population?*

The short answer is “Yes” to both.

Yet, until the introduction of *learning agility* in more recent years, we didn't have a great way to measure motivation as a key component of leader potential, either for selection or development purposes. The behaviorally based **Burke Learning Agility Inventory® (Burke LAI®)** reflects *both* the leader's skill and motivation to quickly try out new behaviors in novel and challenging situations.

In a VUCA world, we may no longer need leaders to do tomorrow what we asked them to do yesterday, and it will likely be the most agile leaders, rather than the “smartest” or “most able,” that succeed.

As learning agility continues to show up as a key differentiator in our understanding and measurement of leader potential, organizations can’t afford to get left behind!

### About the Author

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